

Twisted Red Riding Hood Saga Book 1

SHROUDED

BY

THE HOOD

FELICITY WINTERS

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Chapter One

Before the breaking of dawn, I was awakened by five shadows, cloaked in darkness. Their icy hands reached out and pulled the covers off me, exposing me to the coldness of the morning and of their intentions. The chills did little to dull the pains from each slap, carrying stinging accusations.

"Why have you continued to see?" asked one dark grandmother, her voice a rasping whisper.

"You have reached the age of darkening," said another. She became silent after her voice broke.

"We have always known something is not right with you!" said another dark grandmother. She hissed at me, releasing guttural sounds. "The Wolf should have done something about you before this happened."

I could not provide them with any answer other than "I don't know." And the answer was partly true, for I harbored my own doubts about my future as a dark grandmother long before I entered the forest. My unsatisfactory response to their questions magnified their anger. I stopped answering because the slaps increased in frequency and intensity whenever I spoke. The One with the Crazy Grin, the dark grandmother who always laughed, slapped me so hard that my head felt numb. A welcome sensation. But this reprieve was brief as the hits did not stop.

Each slap reminded me of my endless failures as a red hood. Each slap confirmed my greatest fear: I was not worthy to serve the Wolf. Or the other One for that matter. Here I was silent and weak on the floor. How could I help anyone? Had the time in the forest really changed nothing? But something had changed. No red hood had experienced such punishment from multiple dark grandmothers. I could not determine if they genuinely wanted me to lose my Sight and start transitioning into a dark grandmother. Into one of them.

The emerging light captured a glimpse of the expressions of a few of the dark grandmothers. Their expressions contained equal parts of glee, anger, and satisfaction. In fact, I believe they relished the idea that I failed and that I remained unchanged. They could continue to punish me. They obviously enjoyed subjecting me to the hits, as their smiles grew wider with each hit.

Had the dark grandmothers previously planned a horrific and painful plan for me if I did not lose my Sight?

Did the Wolf discover what happened in the forest? Perhaps, the Wolf had already decided that I could not serve him as a dark grandmother, and He had sent the dark grandmothers to pull the truth from me. Considering what had started to creep into our village, the dark grandmothers and the Wolf should worry less about my lack of Sight. But I was, indeed, different. As far as I knew, every red hood had lost their Sight around the same time and left the village for conversion. So, my Sight must leave eventually. Still, with a threat seeping into our world, the dark grandmothers remained resolute in their desire for me and others to convert and join their ranks. And I continued to vacillate between wanting to become one of them in pretense and in truth.

Despite the extensive teachings from the dark grandmothers and the Wolf, the teachings never quite addressed what awaited an unconverted red hood. Most red hoods believed that we would be banished to the barren world outside. This was just a rumor, though. And my experience in the forest reminded me that this may not be true. After all, no one explained what truly happened to sweet Nadine, but Nadine at least went through the process. Or so they said.

Thinking about Nadine was not helpful. When Nadine did not return, the dark grandmothers treated her permanent absence as natural. No one cared even though Nadine spent most of her days caring for all others. Nadine retained and shared so much knowledge about our world; she helped older red hoods prepare for their conversion. How could the perfect and loyal Nadine not return? The unfairness of this brought tears to my eyes as most thoughts about Nadine did. This pain, not the pain from the hits, made me want to cry, regardless of the consequences.

Despite the pain, I knew that I could not cry in front of them. No red hood cried without jeopardizing her chances of becoming a dark grandmother. And I may need to become one to help the rest of the red hoods. I tried to keep my eyes rolled up, hoping to hold my tears in until they disappeared. The continual hits would eventually knock these tears out, though.

"Your mistress is not here to kick you out. We can do whatever we want to you," one of them jeered.

I was scared. What had happened to my mistress? I could not manage another loss of someone from my household. Why were they doing this to me? Why did I always draw so much ire from the dark grandmothers? I waited for that next hit which would destroy my chances of becoming a dark grandmother and banish me from this dark world to an unknown which could be better or worse.

Six years had passed since tears had last fallen from my eyes. A hard fall on the icy ground had prompted the tears. Unfortunately, a dark grandmother stood close by, removing any opportunity to run home in secret. Since I was seven years old, Nadine had warned me that the dark grandmothers would begin to punish me if they saw tears or sadness in my face. Severe corrections filled the year before I reached eight. Red hoods could not cry after they reached eight years. The intensity of the punishment during my seventh year made me heed Nadine's instructions. Today, Nadine's teachings would need to rescue me. I pinched the thick skin between my right thumb and index finger. Sharp pains brought numbness to my right hand. The welcome flutters of my heart gave me something to focus on. The slaps came with more frequency now. Undoubtedly, my steely resolve outraged them. Nadine always provided the best advice. Ignore them and force them to witness your strength.

"Step back from her and do not gaze upon her hair," said a soft voice. Two grandmothers inhaled loudly. Like me, they had not noticed that my hood had fallen, exposing my hair to them. Tears blurred my vision, but I could see that some of the dark grandmothers started to move away from me. One of the dark grandmothers did not move to leave. Instead, she jumped towards me and yelled after the other dark grandmothers had left.

"No! She needs to be punished. We cannot let this continue," she said.

"Do you believe that you can question the will of the Voice of the Wolf? Perhaps, you want to question the Wolf as well?" said the soft voice. "Dark Grandmothers are not exempt from absolute obedience. No one is above the Wolf."

"You are not covered, either," hissed the dark grandmother. "Why are you even here? Since when does the Voice of the Wolf speak to—"

"Leave." This single word brought a small smile to my face. Dark grandmothers frequently issued this command to red hoods. This command always made me feel lonely and unwanted. Hopefully, the dark grandmother felt some of the pain of a red hood. The Voice of the Wolf

possessed great power as she accomplished an impossible, and dangerous, feat for red hoods: The Voice of the Wolf silenced a dark grandmother, and she could do nothing about it.

"Apologies," muttered the dark grandmother. She turned and left as quickly as the other dark grandmothers.

Dread quickly replaced the small moment of satisfaction. Even though I wanted the dark grandmothers to leave me alone, heaviness crept into my stomach and my heart pounded loudly in my ears. The Voice of the Wolf only consulted with the dark grandmothers. No red hood had heard the Voice of the Wolf speak, but all red hoods revered her. Red hoods took great care to be respectful and silent when the Voice of the Wolf was nearby. I felt thankful that she had stopped the dark grandmothers, but the presence of the Voice of the Wolf could mean that worse things awaited me.

The dark red robe of the Voice of the Wolf moved closer to me. I felt the hood of my robe being placed back over my head. She pushed my hair into the hood. The coldness of her fingers gave me chills.

"You can blink now. Only you and I are here," she said.

I blinked but I quickly wiped the tears from my face. Without asking if I could, I lifted my head to look at her. For the second time of the night, banishment seemed certain. How could a red hood see this and survive? Stepping backward, I fell on my bed.

Chapter Two

She was not wearing her mask or her hood. The Voice of the Wolf was unshrouded, and she was looking right at me. I had never seen the Voice of the Wolf without her hood and mask. One time, Julietta joked that the Voice of the Wolf must be faceless underneath her mask. This joke earned her double chores and a night alone at the entry of the forest. Considering the punishments for lesser infractions, the dark grandmothers would surely subject me to the most severe punishment for this. How could all of this be happening to me? Yes, I had struggled a lot at being a good red hood, but no red hood had experienced such endless mishappenings. At least, no red hood had admitted to such.

Since the Wolf provided for us all, the Voice of the Wolf might be willing to extend grace to me. With a hope of avoiding punishment, I rolled over on the bed, turning away from the strange face. The Voice of the Wolf would see that I did not intend to look upon her. Even though I was face down, I closed my eyes for extra measure. The Voice of the Wolf remained quiet. The silence made me nervous. Did she want me to speak?

The Voice of the Wolf wandered around my room, and she looked through my possessions. Feet shuffled back and forth across the floor. Multiple drawers screeched as she opened and closed them. Was she looking for something? My pencils rolled on my desk and then onto the floor. One of the floorboards rattled because I had repaired it when it had splintered a year ago. After the repair, the space underneath became a safe place to house my private journal. Dark grandmothers permitted us to have journals (which they read); however, this journal scared me. As I struggled to process the year-long visions and the recent messages from the Book, the journal helped clear my mind. The journal relieved me of the burdensome thoughts. The Voice of the Wolf could not find this journal. If she picked the pencils up, she might notice the little notch in the floor which helped me pull the floorboard up with ease.

"I apologize for my stupidity," I said.

"No need to—"

"Thank you for your service to the red hoods. Please allow me the opportunity to get the pencils off the floor for you," I said.

"You may do so."

Without thinking about how suspicious she may find it, I jumped up and got to the floor quickly. While taking care to not lean on my secret hiding space, I picked the pencils up and laid them back on the desk. After that, I remained on the floor with my eyes fixed on the hem of her scarlet robe.

"You can stand up, now. Nothing will happen to you. I just want to speak to you," she said.

She touched the sides of my shoulders. Once standing, I allowed myself to look at her face. She did not have the face of a dark grandmother. She was tall, lean, and poised like a dark grandmother; her face, however, seemed soft and young like mine. Like the other red hoods. If I am being honest, she looked very much like my mistress. They both shared the same hazel color of the eyes, the high cheekbones, and the lengthy eyelashes. More importantly, they shared that expression of mercy which no other dark grandmother bestowed upon red hoods. Life could be challenging for red hoods, but my mistress constantly encouraged me and other struggling red hoods with her mere expressions.

The Voice of the Wolf laughed.

"You are definitely a thinker," she said. "Hmm."

"What?" I asked.

"I know what you are going through," she said.

"You do?"

"Despite my role now," she motioned towards her mask, "I used to be a red hood as well."

"How did you become the Voice of the—"

She held her hand up and shook her head.

"Call me Lyla," she said. Her voice, steady and calm, soothed my nerves.

"Okay," I said.

"The Sight of red hoods has always been, and continues to be, a vital contribution to our society. You will never have to worry about anyone bothering you again, okay?"

"Mmhmm."

"An issue still exists, however." Again, the Voice of the Wolf wandered around my room, dragging her fingers across every surface. "You have continued to be able to read from the Book. While the Wolf and I value this, we need to understand how this is happening. And before the ceremony."

"Has this ever happened to a red hood before? Not losing Sight at the right time, that is," I said.

"Only once," she whispered. Whispering was not allowed among little sisters as all conversations should be heard by a dark grandmother. We were to hold no secrets. I was intrigued by a rule-breaking whatever-she-was so I whispered back.

"Really?"

Lyla turned away from me and placed her hood over her hair. Her hands slowly smoothed out her hood and the rest of the cloak. She turned back towards me with a face less kind and more serious. "Do you see beyond what is written in the Book?" She barely asked the question above a whisper.

My lips could not part to answer her, but Lyla knew.

"Okay. Tell me everything. Leave nothing out." Her icy fingers grabbed me, and she pulled me to the floor. And I told her everything. Whether for good or for bad, I told her everything.

Words gushed out of me like rushing water. The fears, the secrets, and the hopes of the last year escaped my heart. How could I so quickly release some of the hidden thoughts? And to the Voice of the Wolf at that? Maybe she could provide me with an explanation of why my twelfth year had challenged all the teachings of the Wolf. Just maybe, she could confirm that my thoughts about the Wolf were wrong, and I could still join the line of dark grandmothers. And just maybe, nothing was wrong even though that quiet voice in my mind spoke differently. So, I shared everything with the hope that the events of my last year would help the Voice of the Wolf reveal my path forward. The Voice of the Wolf sat quietly on the floor as I began to share the events of my life over the past year. This is my story.

~

From my earliest memory, I remember being different and always wondering if I would ever be worthy enough to become a dark grandmother. Becoming a dark grandmother seemed like such an impossible future for me. This thought made me anxious as no future existed for a red hood who did not become a dark grandmother. Life for every red hood remained the same. Every red hood arrived at our village at the age of five years. We possessed no memories of our time before that, save one single memory of a gray room. Red hoods attended school and learned the ways of the Wolf. Each red hood lost their Sight on the day that she reached thirteen years. The red hood left for a short period and returned as a dark grandmother. This cycle endlessly repeated.

Can you imagine wanting to attain something that your very nature disqualified you for? Regardless of the knowledge of what was expected of everyone, acting contrary to this knowledge still brought endless joy. Since a week remained before I reached thirteen years old, stopping at a favorite spot was a worthy risk. After all, maturation into a dark grandmother would mean that I would no longer feel the way that I do now.

On the north side of the road between the school and the village's center, a large tree with red leaves, red blooms, and white blooms rested quietly in a clearing. Not only was the tree larger than any tree I had ever seen, but the beauty of the tree made our village seem much more subdued and uninviting. This tree was the only tree inside our village. Unlike most things in our village, this tree grabbed the attention of many red hoods and elicited positive responses from all. Whenever we walked with each other, we all bowed our heads when we reached the tree; undoubtedly, we wanted to smile in private with no witnesses.

When the days seemed gloomier than usual, I would stand by or hug this great tree as I was fascinated by the strength of it; this tree looked like it could and had withstood many storms. A late release from school would guarantee a solitary visit to the tree. Forgetting to do some schoolwork typically ensured a late release. Since cleaning and dusting the desks and walls consumed most of the early afternoon, no red hoods remained to walk the road with me today. After reaching the tree, leaning against it helped my shoulders relax. As always, I stood underneath the gaps between the leaves and branches. Holding my hand out, while scared and excited, permitted me to enjoy the cursed rays of the sun. Its warmth sent shivers all over my body. The ground tickled my bare feet with its warmth. No other place felt as warm. These were not the actions of a future dark grandmother.

The actions of this afternoon would certainly disturb the patron of our village. This village served the Wolf, with no exceptions. Worship of the Wolf was both required and a necessity. Mountains of black ice surrounded the little world that the Wolf had carved out for us. These mountains had stayed frozen and kept this village isolated. None of the living dark grandmothers had seen the world that preceded our own, but historical records documented how our village had drastically changed. The village used to be a lush forest surrounded by curtains of water, colorful foliage, and multiple variations of my favorite tree. One day, the waters expanded and froze, sealing everyone in. Because of an ancient enemy to the Wolf,

the Wolf enclosed us in this small, safe space of the world. If we remained hidden and unreachable, the Wolf guaranteed our protection. Our village became stronger, the dark grandmothers told us, when this happened.

The dark grandmothers rarely referenced the others who lived outside the walls. To Dark Grandmother Ruby's dismay, red hoods frequently asked about the outsiders in school. Did they look like us? Could they find a way in through the mountains? Initially, Dark Grandmother Ruby would entertain some of our questions. But then she would give us a stern look. Limited questions were acceptable, but our questions could not imply that we questioned the wolf. Or questioned our presence here.

Condemnation awaits all who reside outside the protection of the Wolf.

One of the Wolf's commandments reminded me of the peril that lies in disobedience. I pulled away from the tree. No, red hoods need to fill our time with sacrifice and devotion so the Wolf would let us join the dark grandmothers. The Wolf raised the first generation of dark grandmothers the day after everything froze. And I should expect nothing different of my future.

"Girl!"

Unexpectedly, a dark grandmother ran towards me from the direction of the village center. A sight that is quite rare. Only one dark grandmother ran. Tilly. Tilly, a red hood who had only been a dark grandmother for a few months, appeared flustered. Initially, it seemed possible that someone had gotten hurt, but then I realized this was Tilly. She tended to behave more like a red hood and less like a dark grandmother.

"Girl!"

But, like a dark grandmother, she chose to not use my name, even though she knew it.

"Yes, Till—, I mean dark grandmother." I couldn't help myself. This was Tilly after all.

"Where is Cecilia? She is supposed to be in the temple today."

"She was at school, but she left earlier when Mistress Ruby dismissed us," I said. Tilly's eyes narrowed at me.

"Why are you still here when Mistress Ruby closed the school earlier?" she asked.

"Mistress Ruby needed help cleaning up both school rooms," I said. "I told her I would finish up so she did not have to."

Tilly nodded her head and seemed to accept my answer.

"You have a few more days of Sight, huh. The dark grandmothers didn't lie. It really does go." Tilly looked away, her eyes glassy.

"Can I assist you Mistress Tilly?" I asked.

"As I said. Cecilia is supposed to be in the temple today. And I'm supposed to be there, too, but she was not there," she said.

Tilly acted strange. Stranger than usual, that is. I actually wanted to help her.

"Do you want me to go to the temple with you?" I asked. Tilly seemed surprised by my request.

"Would you really do that?"

"I will gladly serve you, mistress, if you command it," I said.

"Oh yeah," she said. And there you go. In a moment, Tilly straightened her shoulders and assumed the typical dark grandmother look.

Tilly motioned for me to follow her, which I did. As is customary, I tried to walk behind her, but Tilly motioned again, directing me to walk alongside her.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

Red hoods will not question the authority of the dark grandmothers or the Wolf.

Without thinking I questioned Tilly, and she raised her eyebrow at me.

"I am definitely certain that you did not question me, right?" she asked.

I shook my head at her.

"Let's get moving to the temple. All of the dark grandmothers have left. They are at the Northern Mountain conferring with you-know-who."

I stopped walking. This was not usual. Not wanting to pry too much, I remained silent.

"I am sure everything is alright. They all left me to look after you red hoods," she said.

Tilly's words did not match how she truly felt as Tilly bit her fingernails, a left-over nervous tic from her days of being a red hood.

Things were bad. Visiting the Northern Mountain type of bad.

Chapter Three

Tilly would need a bandage soon. The issue that drove most of the dark grandmothers to the Northern Mountain was gnawing on Tilly. Literally. Not meaning to stare, I looked away as soon as Tilly's eyes widened. Tilly quickly moved her hands into her sleeves. As Tilly never could control her nerves until the offending problem had abated, Tilly began grabbing and twisting her robe with her covered hands.

"Everything is alright. Everything is alright," she said. Tilly turned and continued walking towards the temple. Did something happen at the Northern Mountain? Did something happen to the Wolf? As we walked to the temple, Tilly kept her eyes on the Northern Mountain.

"When can we expect the rest of the dark grandmothers to return from the Northern Mountain?"

Tilly stopped fidgeting with her robe and stared at me. Undoubtedly, she felt that I had overstepped my position. I would need to be more careful from now on.

"It's just that I want to make sure I have everything ready for my mistress when she returns." Tilly seemed to accept my answer; yet, she continued fidgeting.

"While you were all at school, the Voice of the Wolf arrived. The Wolf summoned all dark grandmothers to the Northern Mountain. Everyone should return soon," she said. Her eyes avoided mine. "Hopefully," she added.

"Oh?"

"I should have been there, too," she said.

"Uh-huh," I murmured.

"But there was the issue of you girls. Someone had to watch over you. Encourage you. Reassure you. Naturally, I volunteered, and everyone was so thankful that I would sacrifice time with the Wolf to serve here," she said, her voice rising to an uncomfortable pitch.

I bet. Dark Grandmother Ruby said the edge of the Northern Mountain was two to three days' journey by horse. As anxious as Tilly was now, she would have had no fingertips by the time they reached the Northern Mountain. Leaving Tilly here probably gave the dark grandmothers a break from Tilly and her tendencies.

While Tilly seemed willing to give bits of information, I did not want to push her and make her weary of me. Despite Tilly's strangeness, Tilly was still a dark grandmother.

Tilly stayed silent for the remainder of our walk to the temple. No one travelled to the Northern Mountain. Our patron lived in the Northern Mountain and he never left. The Voice of the Wolf travelled periodically between our village and the Northern Mountain. With no advance notice, the Voice of the Wolf would appear in our village at various times. Her presence would make the dark grandmothers and the red hoods equally anxious. For the most part, though, the Voice of the Wolf rarely delivered any news from the Wolf. Instead, she spent a lot of time just walking around and examining everything.

During my time here, the dark grandmothers never spoke of visiting the Northern Mountain or speaking with the Wolf. It was safe to say that there was consensus that the dark grandmothers never spoke with the Wolf. So why were the dark grandmothers at the Northern Mountain? Why did the Voice of the Wolf arrive and tell the dark grandmothers that they needed to return with her? Since I would hopefully become a dark grandmother soon, I may find out the answers to these questions. It is best to just stay quiet and be patient.

Once we reached the village square, a group of red hoods greeted us. They stood aimlessly in the town square. They had questions as well, but they obviously stopped gossiping when they saw Tilly.

"Good afternoon, girls. No worries. No worries. What are all of you doing here? Why are you not all in your residence or at work?" she said.

"We wanted to wait for a dark grandmother. Your wisdom is indeed needed during a time like this. Did we need to do something to help? Are we going to be okay?" said Ola. Ola suffered from the same tendencies that afflicted Tilly.

"We were waiting for your guidance," said Julietta in a mocking voice. Julietta hid her smile by pulling the side of her hood over her mouth.

I shook my head at her.

"Okay. Listen. The Wolf has prepared us for most eventualities. Generations of dark grandmothers and red hoods have remained safe under the watchful eye of the wolf. We are sealed off. Nothing is wrong," she said. None of us, except for Ola, took Tilly seriously when she issued showy pronouncements.

Julietta rolled her eyes and walked over to one of the stone benches. She sat down and started eating one of the loaves of bread in her basket. Her mistress never let her eat bread while it was fresh.

"Did the dark grandmothers have any instructions for us?" I asked.

Tilly stared at me with her mouth open.

"Um."

They had obviously left instructions.

"Let's do this. Daphine, I still need you in the temple since Cecilia is not here, I guess. The rest of you, I-" Tilly's voice trailed off. "Everyone stays right here. I'll be back." Tilly ran south, most likely to her residence.

Julietta walked up to me, second loaf in hand.

"Where's Cecilia?" asked Julietta.

"I haven't seen her since class. Did she show up at the temple at all?" I asked.

"She did. Once we got back here, she went in straight away. But if all of the dark grandmothers had already left..." Julietta shrugged.

"She may have left if no dark grandmother was there," I said.

"Right. We can't stay in there alone. Frankly that book in there creeps me out. Slim chance I'm staying in the temple alone. But you know what doesn't make sense?" Julietta lowered her voice and leaned in close to me.

"What?" I asked.

"Once we all realized the dark grandmothers had all left. We each knocked on each other's doors and assembled here. Cecilia's house? All quiet."

"If she is not home, where is she?" Red hoods did not have that many places where they were permitted to go.

"She's behind the temple," inserted Ola.

"Where?" asked Julietta.

"Between the mounds of extra wheat."

"Why didn't you say something sooner, Ola?" Julietta glared at Ola.

"Daphine and I are talking about where she is. Wouldn't that be information that you should share?"

"You didn't ask." Ola walked up to Julietta and grabbed her loaf of bread.

"Did you know that you could be frustrating?" asked Julietta. Julietta shook her head and grabbed my arm. "Come on, Daphine." We walked around the temple and we found little Cecilia. Just as Ola described, Cecilia

was sitting on the ground between the mounds of wheat. Her face was hidden between her crossed arms and knees.

"Hey, Cecilia." Julietta started walking towards Cecilia but I stopped Julietta from approaching Cecilia. Something seemed wrong. Cecilia was perfectly still but she was not sleeping. A small voice, Cecilia's, could be heard. Julietta and I looked at each other. We approached Cecilia slowly. Julietta must have understood what Cecilia whispered as she dropped her basket and started breathing heavily. Cecilia lifted her face from her arms. She looked at me with wet and bloodshot eyes.

She spoke again and this time I heard her clearly.

"The book speaks."

The book speaks. What did Cecilia mean?

"No, no, no, no." Julietta shook her head at me. "I knew it." Julietta's voice had reached a loud shrill. After running up to Julietta, I placed a hand over her mouth. Dark Grandmother Tilly could not see any of us acting this way. As strange as she was, Tilly was still a dark grandmother. At the very least, she could tell one of the other dark grandmothers. When they returned. If they returned. Perhaps their absence was related to whatever was going on with Cecilia. Okay. Now, I need to stop. These thoughts would not help me or my fellow red hoods. Having Cecilia freak out was one thing. Seeing Julietta fall apart unnerved me much more. Nothing bothered Julietta. Julietta needed to compose herself so I could as well.

With my hand across her mouth, Julietta appeared to calm down some. Julietta's breathing slowed down and she looked more like herself.

"There *has* to be an explanation for this. We don't know what Cecilia means. The dark grandmothers have shown us how to practice self-control. We can control ourselves, right?" Julietta nodded and gently pulled my hand down from her mouth.

"Right," she said.

"Let's find out what she really means," I said. Not wanting to scare Cecilia, Julietta and I slowly approached Cecilia. Her head was still down, and she continued to repeat those same three words. Our presence was certainly known to her, yet Cecilia appeared as if she was in a trance of sorts.

"The book speaks," repeated Cecilia. Julietta flinched each time Cecilia spoke. Julietta shook her head at me. Given Julietta's initial reaction, Julietta obviously expected me to speak to Cecilia. What could I say to

make Cecilia stop? How long had she been like this? Honestly, I could not recall if Cecilia was at school earlier. I thought that she was but I could have been wrong. Cecilia and I usually avoid each other.

“Cecilia,” I whispered. After whispering her name, Cecilia lifted her face. and her watery, brown eyes stared directly into my own. Her eyes were different. She looked lost. “Can you tell us what happened?”

“Are you okay?” asked Julietta. What was Julietta doing? No, Julietta. Cecilia was definitely *not* okay. Cecilia was silent now, but her eyes remained squarely on me. Something happened and this something had changed something inside of her.

Being careful not to scare Cecilia more, I kneeled near her.

“What happened?” I asked.

“The book spoke to me,” she said.

“I don’t understand. What’s written in there changes every day. We all know that. The dark grandmothers tell us it is normal,” I said. And that was true. The contents of the book constantly shifted. At times, words could disappear and reappear later. And sometimes we could not understand what was written within.

“No,” she said, her voice dropping lower. “It appeared as it always does. But I didn’t have to read it.”

I frowned. Cecilia did not make sense. Julietta shook her head. I tried to grab her sleeve to keep her from leaving.

“I can’t listen to this. Take my advice, Daphne. Don’t listen to this. We are too close to losing our Sight anyhow. Let the dark grandmothers handle this. This is not our problem,” Julietta said.

“It is. You know we can’t avoid going to the temple,” I said. Julietta pulled her sleeve from my hand. Without another word, Julietta ran away from the temple, leaving me alone. I did not expect this of Julietta. After turning back to Cecilia, I watched Cecilia drop her head.

“Inside your head. When I read the book this time, it spoke to me inside my head,” she said.

“I still don’t understand, Cecilia,” I said.

“I heard the words on the page in my head.” Cecilia pointed to her head. “A strange voice spoke the words and then it began saying things that weren’t mentioned on the page. Things about the Wolf and the dark grandmothers.” Cecilia leaned in closer to me. “Forbidden things.”

“Who spoke? And what did this voice say about-”

“I can’t say anymore,” she said.

“I won’t tell the dark grandmothers,” I said.

“They already know,” she said.

“They do. What did they-”

“I lost it when I heard that voice speaking to me. Dark Grandmother Mariah ran inside the temple and found me. Once she found out what happened, she made me meet with the other dark grandmothers. And the Voice of the Wolf was there, too. Don’t know why *she* was here. After they all spoke a bit, they told me to stay here. And I’ve been here since.”

“But what did you hear? Can’t you tell me something?” I asked.

Cecilia held her hand up. “I cannot share what I heard. The dark grandmothers said all of the red hoods would die if they found out.”

Chapter Four

Die? What did Cecilia hear? Would Cecilia die? Would I die? Sure, the book was weird. But how could a book, even this one, kill?

“Then why would Dark Grandmother Tilly ask me to serve in the temple today?” I asked. “If something is wrong with the book, wouldn’t the dark grandmothers tell us to stay away from it?”

Cecilia shrugged. “When I met with the dark grandmothers, Tilly wasn’t there. What if no one told her what happened? But, I’m sure of one thing after today.” Cecilia shuddered. “Don’t trust that book. There’s a reason the dark grandmothers make us read that book for the Wolf.”

And of course, I would be the first red hood to read after Cecilia. Maybe, I could persuade Tilly to forget about the temple and to focus on something more pressing, like the dark grandmothers traveling to the Northern Mountain. Since that never happens. If this bothers me, this surely will tighten the strings on our high-strung Tilly.

“Are you going to do it?” asked Cecilia.

“Do what?” I asked.

“Read from the book?” asked Cecilia.

“I don’t know. What about you?” Hopefully, a suggestion that the book posed a threat would convince Tilly to keep all red hoods, especially me, away from the book.

“Never,” said Cecilia. She raised her voice slightly.

“Never?” I asked, lowering my voice again. Cecilia may become upset again. Cecilia was my only hope to gain more information about what was going on. Unless they deemed it as information essential to serving the wolf, the dark grandmothers would not voluntarily share all information with red hoods. Also, did Cecilia tell the dark grandmothers everything before they left?

“Never again. The dark grandmothers said the Wolf would never want me to read it again,” she said. She roughly rubbed her face, in a failed attempt to conceal the forbidden tears.

“Are you upset that you will never read from it again? You still had time left,” I said.

“No. It’s not that. That voice from the book. It won’t go away. Why can’t I get it out of my head?” She motioned back towards the temple. “Staying

away from the temple doesn't matter if I continue hearing the voice. I hope that it stops when I reach thirteen next month."

I forgot that Cecilia reached thirteen shortly after me. If I could not escape reading duties, I needed to focus on the positive: I would continue to read for one more week. Surely, I could do this. Right? Julietta had been scared each time she visited the temple but she did it. Unlike Julietta, reading the book never scared me before. Reading from the book reminded me that I could spend some more time as a red hood. As long as we could read from the book, we could continue to be red hoods. Each assigned day of reading meant that I was one day closer to becoming a dark grandmother. When you turned thirteen, you could no longer read from the book and your time as a dark grandmother started.

Reading could be boring but the constantly changing text sometimes made it interesting to read. See, portions of the book constantly changed and red hoods had a knack for finding and identifying the changes. Red hoods copied the changes into our journals, which the dark grandmothers reviewed. None of my journal entries really captured the attention of my mistress but things did change last week. Last week, one of the changes mentioned a gardening technique. The book had never mentioned gardening before. At least, not in my readings. My mistress shared my surprise as she commented, "That's new and strange." Because dark grandmothers continually forced red hoods to devote their time to examining the book, the grandmothers seemed to value the book. But this book seemed harmless and useless to red hoods. I never understood why Julietta feared the book. Technically, the book belonged to the enemy of the Wolf which is why we read it. Supposedly, our work allowed the Wolf to stay apprised of his enemy's movements and plans. But as I said, the book seemed harmless. Until now. Like Julietta, I now wanted to keep a distance between myself and the book.

"As soon as the dark grandmothers return, they should throw that thing into the nearest oven," Cecilia said.

"You know we need it."

"Do we really?" Cecilia leaned her head to the side.

Who knows? Cecilia's question was valid but meaningless. The dark grandmothers would never throw it out. This book belonged to a different time. To the time when the Wolf fought his enemy. While the book belonged to the enemy, the dark grandmothers claimed that "monitoring"

the book would help the Wolf prepare for any future war. Each time we read the strange instructions, claims, and descriptions, none of the information seemed helpful for the Wolf, though. Before each reading session, dark grandmothers reminded us that we had cursed sight that we could use for good. Reporting the book's nuances prepared us to be good dark grandmothers.

Without saying anything else to Cecilia, I walked away. One of the red hoods may know where Tilly went to. As carefully as possible, I planned to plead my case to Tilly. If I needed to spend time in the temple today, I wanted to know soon so I would not obsess about it.

When I returned to the village square, I slowed down. No one was there. Every red hood must have decided to return to their residence. At the very least, Visa should be waiting here. If you want to know something, get Visa on your side. She has a knack for slyly finding out anything she wants to know without the dark grandmothers becoming suspicious. Tilly must be checking to make sure that everyone stays inside. Knowing Tilly, her home visits would probably last until tomorrow. Why should I wait and find out if I need to serve in the temple today? A few red hoods, including Cecilia, have been known to exaggerate. Surely, I would regret this, but I felt that I needed to just go ahead and read today. Cecilia and I were the only ones around and Cecilia was not going inside the temple anytime soon. Again, I would probably regret my decision but I needed to read today so I could see that Cecilia was wrong. So, I walked into the temple.

I already regretted my decision. I stood in the doorway, wanting to run back to safety. What if Cecilia was right? While contemplating what I should do next, I ran my hands upon the inside of the doorway, hoping to distract myself. No one ever questioned why the temple had a doorway but no door. A locked door would have been a welcome remedy to my overwhelming need to rebel and to question. Only a few days remained before I could start becoming a dark grandmother. Why not find out what is happening?

Stones of varying shades of gray and creamy white framed the doorway. Black stains, much like those on the stones above the hearths in the village, marked the stones of the doorway, the ground, and the grand arch inside. Feeling heavy, my feet slid forward, moving me deeper into the temple. The interior could intimidate red hoods as the large space only housed a pedestal

table and the book in the center. I walked to the window on the right. All was quiet outside.

Fear should have pulled me out of here. Fear helped red hoods stay obedient to the Wolf. Fear should halt me from carrying out another ill-advised and anti-future-dark-grandmother act. But something had occurred here. My curiosity now outweighed my fear. A light smell billowed near the window. The scent reminded me of the times when we mulled cider. Why would a red hood mull cider right now? I opened the window, and the outside air was normal. After lowering the window, I rotated on my heels and eyed the book. As I approached the book, the scent became stronger.

With no hesitation, I eagerly examined the book. For red hoods to use our sight, we simply looked into the book and words began to take shape. The words looked like ripples on the surface of water. The writing was incredibly dark against a bright amber background. If you closed your eyes, you could sometimes still make out echoes of the writing. Today, no writing appeared. Whatever occurred during Cecilia's time in the temple had deactivated the book. Writing always appeared in the book. But surely, this must be temporary. If someone saw me leave the temple now, would the Wolf believe that I did something else to the book? Cecilia did not say that the book stopped doing whatever it was doing in the first place. Well, I messed up now. I am going to have to get this working again.

I leaned closer and placed both hands close to the book, taking care to not touch the book. The Wolf forbade red hoods from ever touching the book. This was almost as grievous as entering the temple and reading without a dark grandmother present. Which of course, I was doing right now. Bright red and gold leaves of an unknown material outlined the border of the book. Maybe a small touch would be enough to get it working again. I gently pressed the tip of my finger on the side of a leaf. A sharp pain ran through my hand as a small trail of blood ran down my finger. A light chill ran over my body.

"Why do you worship the Wolf?" spoke a voice.

I jumped and looked around me. No one was in the room with me. The voice did not seem to come from the book itself. The book remained blank, dark. The voice seemed to come from my head. Just like Cecilia said. Was I imagining this? Did Cecilia's tale infiltrate my mind and make me hear things?

“Why do you worship the Wolf?” repeated the voice. The voice was incredibly soft and soothing.

“Because I must,” I said.

“Why?” asked the strange voice.

“Because the dark grandmothers say we must do so. And why wouldn’t we? The Wolf takes care of us.”

“Why do you worship the Wolf?”

“I don’t know.” I yelled. Why was I yelling? I placed my hands on the side of my face. It was wet. Why was I crying?

“Why do you worship the Wolf?” the voice repeated.

“Who are you?”

“I am the one who will tell you the truth. You worship the Wolf because he lies. Your world is shrouded in lies.”

Deep down, I knew the owner of the voice was right.

“Tell me more,” I said.

The ground shook. A series of clacks surrounded me. I ran outside the temple and the ground still shook. The clacks and cracking sounds became louder. Piercing my ears. When I looked toward the Northern Mountain, I screamed and everything faded to black.

Chapter Five

“You worship the Wolf because he lies.”

The treasonous words echoed throughout the blackness that surrounded me. Throbs of pain hit me as the images of the Northern Mountain scrolled across my mind. Initially, the shaking of the ground caused me to doubt my vision. With each swaying of the ground, the Northern Mountain seemed to sway as well. Everything appeared normal. But dark cracks appeared on the surface of the mountain one by one. Fine pieces of white ice emerged from the cracks in the black ice. Over the assumed entrance to the Northern Mountain, a bright hole appeared. One long crack spread horizontally and vertically from this spot. The white ice flew out of the cracks while large chunks of black ice broke off of the Northern Mountain fell. Seeing the collapse of portions of the Northern Mountain coupled with the white ice flying towards our village knocked me out. Wait...did the Northern Mountain continue to break apart? Since I passed out, was the Northern Mountain...still....there?

Between the pains, the words, and the memories of what just happened, I could not make myself open my eyes. Who knew what would await me? And was I responsible? Nadine's presence would be a welcome salve to my pain right now. No, I could not think of her. If that unknown voice was right, Nadine's absence...No, I could not start thinking about that, either. Figuring out how to clear my mind and how to stop the pain. Those would be my only goals. Not wanting to test anything else today, I stayed as still as possible and slowed down my breathing. Relaxation may minimize my pain. Hopefully.

“Daphine?”

Did I hear that? This could be in my head.

“Daphine!” The voice yelled at me this time.

The voice sounded familiar, but I was too scared to open my eyes or to respond. Instead, my body remained still.

“Is she dead?” a different voice asked.

“Really? Of course not. We need to wake her up so she can get inside.” This was Julietta's voice.

“We're not taking her in *there*, right?” asked the second voice.

“The temple? Of course not. We can take her to her mistress’s. What is she doing outside, anyhow?”

I opened my eyes. Cecilia and Julietta hovered over me. Julietta started when I locked eyes with her. Cecilia did not move to keep Julietta from falling backwards. Instead, Cecilia’s eyes narrowed.

“What were you doing outside the temple?”

Ignoring Cecilia, I slowly sat up.

“Is everyone okay?”

“Are *you* okay? You have been knocked out cold for a while,” asked Julietta. She sat up.

The head pains had subsided. When I touched the back of my head, it smarted some.

“You’re not bleeding, but you are going to have headaches for a while. You may want to ask the dark grandmothers to let you rest when they return if you’re still in pain. Let’s get you back so you can rest.” Julietta tilted her face towards Cecilia. They exchanged strange looks.

“If they return,” said Cecilia.

“This is not the right time, Cecilia,” said Julietta. She shoved Cecilia. “Why don’t you help me get Daphine back? She has been on the ground long enough.”

“We could wait for Dark Grandmother Tilly.”

“She has locked herself inside. She is not answering anyone,” said Julietta. “Useless” muttered Julietta.

Cecilia and Julietta stood on both sides of me and lifted me under my arms. Once standing, I went to walk forward and almost fell. My body was very weak. How long had I been out?

“Whoa, Daphine. Let’s take it slow.” Even though Julietta asked me to take it slow, Julietta’s pace was not so. She wanted me to return quickly. Why? I turned my head to look back at the Northern Mountain.

“Let’s just get back, Daphine.” Julietta’s voice shook.

“What’s wrong with the Northern Mountain?” I asked.

Cecilia looked away. She remained silent.

“Please, Daphine,” pleaded Julietta.

“Let me see,” I whispered.

Cecilia walked away. Julietta helped me turn around so I could look. The surrounding walls of black ice looked unchanged but the Northern Mountain did not. Chunks of black and white ice lay at the foot of the

Northern Mountain. Some of these pieces seemed to be one-third of the height of the mountain. How could they break off like that? The Northern Mountain remained, somewhat, but the remaining structure had patches of white ice all over.

“Now you know,” said Julietta.

“What about the dark grandmothers?” I asked.

“They are dead,” said Cecilia. Cecilia had moved to stand next to me. Her face was dead pan.

“We don’t know that. Daphine, we don’t know anything. But, if Tilly has locked herself inside, she may be thinking that no one made it,” said Julietta.

“The Wolf is alive, though,” said Cecilia. “We will survive, and I will become one of the new dark grandmothers.”

“And how is that going to happen? You know what, Cecilia. I don’t want to know,” said Julietta.

Cecilia grabbed my hands. Her face had changed and she was joyful.

“The Wolf *is* alive. You and I both will become the next two dark grandmothers.”

My heart fluttered with fear. I would need to escape before this happened.

Cecilia’s eyes bored into me. Eerily, she resembled a dark grandmother. Red hoods should look forward to becoming dark grandmothers because our lives have prepared us for that eventuality. But, Cecilia simply did not look forward to it. Her face revealed an odd desperation and fixation on becoming a dark grandmother that I had never seen before. This was completely out of character for her. Cecilia resembled most red hoods in trying to stay obedient and to stay focused on pleasing the Dark Grandmothers and the Wolf; but Cecilia seemed aggressive. Her words felt more like threats.

“Come on, Daphine. Not much we can do right now for the Dark Grandmothers,” said Julietta. “And dark grandmothers can handle themselves.” Julietta grabbed the side of my left shoulder and turned me away from what remained of the Northern Mountain. Cecilia grabbed me and pulled me close. This was...different. Her shaggy brown hair now hung over face. Between the strands, haunted eyes peered at me. What if she figured out that I entered the temple after her? Would she report me to the Wolf? The strange behavior confirmed that Cecilia had plans. However,

these plans may not be beneficial to me. While thinking, Cecilia continued to examine me. Stepping forward, I continued towards the abode of my mistress. In as gentle a manner as I could, my arm slid out of Cecilia's arms. Resistance prevented me from fully extricating myself from Cecilia's grasp. Was Cecilia's arms getting tighter around mine? Running was not an option as my body had stiffened from the combination of the coming evening's cold and the fall onto the stony ground.

"Julietta, I think I'm going to be sick." I lied. In as dramatic a fashion as I could muster, my knees dropped to the hard ground, pulling my arms out of Cecilia's grip. Each of my knees paid the price for my climactic act. Numbness and stiffness did not stifle the pain of the fall. Once Julietta leaned over and saw my face, she looked concerned.

"Let's get you back now" Julietta said desperately, trying to push Cecilia away from me. "You know, Cecilia. Why don't you go back on your own. Meditate on the teachings of the Wolf. Clean your robe. Offer to help Tilly. It doesn't matter. We just don't need you here."

Cecilia opened her mouth to speak but then slowly closed her mouth. She looked toward the Northern Mountain and then turned to look at Julietta and me. Cecilia raised her hands and clasped them in the typical Dark Grandmother way. Left hand over the right. All three of us stood in silence. Despite the cold, Cecilia began to sweat. Her shaggy hair looked damp. Her face became puffy, red, and wet. After what seemed like minutes, Cecilia started walking towards her mistress's dwelling. While walking, she kept her eyes on us as long as she could before she finally looked forward.

"Jeez, I thought she would never leave," gasped Julietta.

"I am sorry," I said.

"Nothing to it," said Julietta. "It's starting to really get dark."

She was right. To the left, the familiar glow was fading from the dark clouds.

"I am worried about Cecilia," I said quietly.

"Don't be. You don't want to worry about her. Stay away from her. When everything started shaking, I went to check on the younger red hoods. I knew Tilly wouldn't, said Julietta. "I told the younglings to stay where they were. Since *you* were supposed to be at your mistress's, I checked on Starcy last. Imagine my surprise when Starcy said she was scared because she was alone."

“Starcy!” I exclaimed. How could I forget about Starcy? “Was she okay? Was she hurt?”

Julietta raised her hand.

“She’s okay now. But she was on the floor. Her condition made it difficult for her to stand with whatever was happening to the ground,” said Julietta. “Of course, I went to look for you. I figured you were at the temple or at your tree. Once I left your mistress’s and made my way to the temple square, I saw Cecilia on the ground outside her mistress’s dwelling.” Julietta stopped.

“What was she doing?”

“I am not sure. She was on her knees. Her eyes were closed and her hands were folded. She looked like she was worshiping like a dark grandmother. But, Daphine, everything was shaking. I called her name. Even shook her. But she kept mouthing something. It looked like she was repeating the same thing. The strange thing is when I decided to leave her to find you, she began to scream.”

Julietta started looking left and right as we walked. She pulled me closer.

“What else?” I asked.

“She screamed for a minute and then she just stopped.” Julietta lowered her voice. “And then she said something weird. She said that the Wolf will need you and her. I would stay away from her crazy. I will tell you more later. Go inside and rest.”

Julietta hugged me. Red hoods rarely, if ever, risked hugging each other. Julietta quickly left. I wiped my secret tears away and walked inside.

Once inside, I rested against the door. What if the dark grandmothers did not return? Ending up stuck with Tilly would be okay. But the dark grandmothers' absence would allow whatever was eating Cecile to fester. My chest tightened as I recalled what Julietta said about Cecilia. I needed to preoccupy my mind with something else. Once I stepped into the room, I gasped.

“Starcy! Why are you laying there? And around this glass?” Shards of porcelain and mostly glass lay around her. Small shiny pieces of glass glistened on her oversized robe.

“It happened too fast. I was cleaning the window when the shaking started. I couldn’t grab everything and move away from the window quick enough.” said Starcy. She kept her head down.

A turned over metal bowl and fabric scraps rested next to Starcy.

"You could have left all that stuff, Starcy."

"You know I can't leave everything a mess," she said.

"It's still a mess. You could have gotten really hurt," I snapped.

Starcy flinched at my voice. I felt bad. And Starcy really would not have been able to move fast enough. But she could not get hurt. If she got hurt, she would not be able to do any work. *All* red hoods had to contribute to live here.

Under the glow of the lanterns, Starcy's frame shook slightly. She had been on the floor all day.

"Let me get something to clean up. I'll be right back." Starcy did not respond.

"Starcy? Did you get any glass on you? Are you alright? Talk to me."

Starcy lifted her head. Her tanned face appeared gray while her lips and eyelids appeared a much darker bluish purple.

"When the shaking started and everything started breaking, the robe kept everything off me. I'm just a little tired" whispered Starcy.

"If you wait a minute, I will get you out of there," I said. "We both need rest after today."

"Okay" said Starcy weakly.

While stepping slowly, I moved between the small spaces without glass on the floor. Once I got across the sitting room, I stomped into the kitchen.

"Ouch!" Even though my foot hit something, I continued to search quickly in the dark kitchen. *How could Tilly let this happen? She was supposed to be checking on the red hoods. Tilly is probably curled up underneath her bed. Probably has her attending red hoods sliding food to her.* I shook my head. Julietta was right. Tilly had managed to become even more useless as a dark grandmother. Absolutely useless.

My knee knocked into the leg of one of the tables, most likely the one holding herbs. Broom should be against the wall to the right of this. Of course, it was not. Kneeling down, I slid my hands until I found the broom.

"Got it. On my way," I called out.

Once I returned to the sitting room, I was relieved to see Starcy sitting up entirely. She sat quietly and watched me as I cleaned up all of the glass and porcelain surrounding her. Her light gray eyes, dark in this light, looked on sadly. Undoubtedly, because she was forced to accept my assistance in this moment.

“Do you have another clean hood?” Starcy shook her head. “You can have one of mine but let’s get this off you now. I’ll carry you into your room.

“No!” she said sharply. She pulled back from me, letting some of the small shards of glass fall off onto the floor.

“Starcy, it’s okay. It’s okay. I won’t tell anyone,” I said.

“I have to walk there! On my own.”

“I hear you, but you have to stay still. Glass has fallen to the floor around you. Can I get this glass away from you?” I asked.

Starcy nodded in assent.

“Can you help me, though? There are small pieces of glass still on the bottom part of your robe. Stand up and step out of it. While you do that, I will light the lamps in the kitchen and the rest of the rooms.”

Moving through the rooms quickly, I lit the remaining lamps. Cleaning up the oil as I walked back to the sitting room, resentful thoughts of Tilly filled my head. What would have happened to Starcy if I had returned much later?

Red hoods will honor all dark grandmothers. Honor belonged to dark grandmothers and the Wolf but I could not do it today. Tilly deserved no honor. So I could stop dwelling on disobedient thoughts, I shifted my attention to getting an extra robe to Starcy.

When I returned to the sitting room, I handed my robe to Starcy.

“Is that yours?” asked Starcy. Her eyes widened.

“It’s alright. I can make another robe for you. This one will fit better than the one Nadine left behind for you.” I gently addressed her. Robes held extreme value. They were usually passed down from previous red hoods. Damaging or losing a robe usually resulted in multiple swipes of the rod on your hands.

Starcy slid her robe to me. I swept the robe and the remaining pieces of glass into a pile by the door.

Starcy smiled. While the act obviously pained her to do so, Starcy lifted herself off the floor and stood with perfect posture. While holding herself upright, she started to walk towards the kitchen.

“Can I help you? Just a little bit. The floor is quite a mess in the kitchen. Look at my knee.” I lifted my robe to show her my fresh bruise.

Together, we walked toward the backroom. Despite wearing the robe, Starcy’s body continued to feel cold. When we reached the back room, I

lowered Starcy to the bed.

“Don’t I need to take the robe off?” asked Starcy.

“You’re too cold for that. Let’s get the blankets on you. I’ll make sure to get your room extra warm tonight.”

“You are good, Daphine. Never forget that.” Wearing a wry smile, Starcy grabbed my right hand and held it in both of hers. “I know you try your best with me but it’s okay if it’s not enough.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You’re trying. I’m trying. Maybe it will be enough. But if it isn’t, thank you.”

Chapter Six

Rest eluded me throughout the evening. My light blanket could not overcome the unyielding wooden floor. As painful as the floor was, I remained firmly seated on the floor across from Starcy's bed. For such a slowly moving person, sleep revealed a portion of Starcy's strength as she thrashed around throughout the night. Even now, one of my blankets had already fallen onto the floor, exposing Starcy's bony legs. Surprisingly, her legs and body looked better now. When she first arrived at the village, she came in like I did. She fidgeted and would scarcely look me or our mistress in the eyes. My mistress often questioned if Starcy had eaten often before as she appeared so frail. Starcy's legs looked like they should not be able to support the weight of a body on them. Like her legs, no fat or muscle seemed to touch the rest of her body. In a brief period of time, Starcy had taken on additional chores of other red hoods. This had accomplished two things. She earned the surprise, and possibly respect, of the dark grandmothers. Secondly, each task taxed her body's limits but left her able to take on additional work. But would the Wolf permit her to become a dark grandmother? I recalled when Starcy first arrived in my life.

Months ago, my mistress warned me that I would lose my vision soon, so she would begin looking for my replacement as well as securing a little sister for me for when I joined their elite status of dark grandmothers. Being without Nadine made me more fearful of being alone and of losing the Sight.

"Do not fear losing Sight as you will gain a better understanding and wisdom that accompanies the darkness," my mistress said.

You shall become as the blind and let the darkness guide you to greatness.

My mistress followed through on her plan and brought home Starcy. When she arrived, she was too young to understand what environment she lived in. She resembled me. She fidgeted and would scarcely look me or our mistress in the eyes. Like my mistress, I wondered if she had eaten often before as she appeared so frail.

"Are you hungry, Starcy?" Those were my first words to Starcy. She answered by nodding her head. "Follow me into the kitchen and we will find something for the both of us." I walked to our kitchen which was not

far. It was probably six of my paces from edge of our sitting room down the hallway to the kitchen. When I turned around after reaching the kitchen she was still walking down the hallway taking slow and precise steps with her head down the entire time. Her upper body would sometimes sway left and write as she walked. I wanted to go and grab her by her hand to rush her along, but she needed to get around with no assistance as I would not be able to accompany her everywhere. She would receive some daily tasks that she would need to complete on her own. As soon as she completed the very painstaking task of walking to the kitchen, I kneeled on one knee so that I could look her in the eyes and asked her quietly while holding her chin, "What is wrong with your legs?"

"I was born this way. I hope becoming a dark grandmother will repair my legs. They say I am supposed to be fixed during converse," she said.

"During conversion, you mean?"

"I guess." She shrugged her shoulders. She looked around the room.

I thought of one of the dark grandmother's words recently: *The weak must not inherit any blessings*. How would Starcy be fixed?

"Ready to eat? I have some fruit that I baked with some spices. They may not have cooled down too much. If you let me get around you, I could pull them down for you," I said.

"I can do it. Is it in the dark green bowl? Covered with a towel and on the shelf?" I nodded. "I can do it."

I didn't believe she could do it. At least not without injuring herself further. I didn't know how she would move around and carry out her duties in the village on her own.

"Why don't you let me get it for you?"

Starcy's bright blue eyes began to brim with tears.

"Okay," I responded. "Go ahead." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and gave a small smile before she turned around. I watched her try to stretch her body to one side. I didn't want to see her hurt but I wanted her, actually, I *needed* her to prove that she could serve our mistress in any capacity unaided. Starcy could not quite reach it and just as I was about to help her, she grabbed the rolling pin sitting out on the counter and shifted the container towards her so it could drop into her waiting right hand. She gave a sheepish smile when she saw me looking at the rolling pin but I was impressed by her ingenuity. Maybe some of the dark grandmothers had seen this same trait and that is why she was here to serve in preparation for

conversion. But who was the weak to them? Nadine must have been but if you asked me right now who was the stronger of Nadine and Starcy I would answer Nadine. Was Nadine's concern for others a weakness while her concern for her mistress was something that was demanded? Classes never taught us any of this. Again, there was this large abyss of ambiguity concerning what qualified a little sister to be worth enough to convert.

This memory coupled with Starcy's last words to me gripped my mind, preventing me from leaving Starcy alone last night. For such a frail girl, she had more strength than other red hoods. Especially me. If Tilly could become a dark grandmother, Starcy should have earned the right many times over. Nothing seemed fair. I had caught a few dark grandmothers whispering and frowning as they watched Starcy move about. Maybe that voice was right. Did the Wolf lie? For a moment, I considered sharing what happened in the temple, but doing that would place an unfair burden on her. Not to mention, dangerous. Could the source of this voice give me a way to help Starcy? Or would that make matters worse? Once I became a dark grandmother, maybe the new role would afford me some power.

Outside, a small rapping sound started from afar. At first, the sound resembled the light patter of rain, which our seedlings desperately needed. Over the sound of Starcy's loud breathing, this repeating sound became louder. It sounded very much like horses. But the dark grandmothers, if they were okay, would not have made it back from the Northern Mountain so quickly. Who could this be? We still had a few horses in the village. Knowing Tilly, she could be on her way to the Northern Mountain to find the Wolf. No, she would not go alone. But she would go if she took a few red hoods with her.

I jogged to my room and retrieved my hood. While walking towards the front, I placed my slippers on, almost tripping. Once I left the house, I did not see anything. No horses. No one. The sounds had even stopped. Early morning light had started to peak through the clouds and illuminate the village. Walking towards the village square, everything remained silent and still. As I was about to pass the house on the left, I finally heard a rustle. Not wanting to call out to the source of the sound, I instead walked to the front of the house. Moving slowly against the side of the house, I stopped when I heard a voice. At least two voices. Using the side of the house to shield me, a peek around the corner of the house gave me a view.

Cecilia was outside with Dark Grandmother Donnis, who I liked to call the One with the Crazy Grin. Of course, never to her face. But what was she doing here? She left with the other dark grandmothers, didn't she? Cecilia unloaded one small leather sack. What was Cecilia doing out here? Visa should be helping.

"Get them *up*. All of them up. *Everyone* should be working," hissed the One with the Crazy Grin. "Bring everyone to the village square."

"Of course, Dark Grandmother," said Cecilia.

"And ring the bell," the One with the Crazy Grin tossed at Cecilia. "Then get Dark Grandmother Tilly-"

The bell. As quiet as possible, I rushed back to get Starcy. If the One with the Crazy Grin caught me running, she could become suspicious, so I walked quickly. A ring of the bell in the village square meant that red hoods needed to quickly present themselves in the village center. Typically, the assembly meant that a red hood needed punishment for straying too far from the village limits or defying a dark grandmother. If the One with the Crazy Grin assumed supervision over the red hoods, red hoods would receive little rest from now on. While I never thought I would say this, Tilly would be a better option. No sooner had I arrived at the house and entered before the bell rang. With each gong of the bell, cramps seized my stomach.

"Starcy! Starcy!"

"I know" said Starcy. Already dressed in her hood, she walked out of the kitchen. "I got up a few minutes ago. You weren't here. But, never mind that. Why is the bell ringing? Did Tilly ring it?"

"It was Dark Grandmother Donnis. Let's leave now. We cannot be late," I said.

Our arrival to the village center quickly revealed that this would be a painful morning. Unfortunately, most red hoods believed that Tilly was the only remaining dark grandmother. Some red hoods let their untamed hair peek out their hoods. Some red hoods did not stand on the red stones that outlined a square around the bell. A requirement for red hoods. Starcy and I, however, stood as required. Julietta, initially, sat on the ground but she quickly stood on one of the red stones when she saw me standing.

Red hoods finally began to assemble as required. Whispers of "It's not Tilly" started to spread among my little sisters. Tragically, some red hoods assumed their proper placement too late. The One with the Crazy Grin shoved Visa onto a red stone.

“Girls, girls, girls. The Wolf most certainly is disappointed. Thought we were all gone, huh? In Mistress Gwendolyn’s great wisdom, she suggested that I abandon the trip and return. It is a good thing that I did. It is not good for red hoods to be alone.”

Tilly ran into the square, knocking over Patrice.

“Mistress Donnis. Oh you're here. I was going to-”

“Shut your mouth, Tilly,” said the One with the Crazy Grin. “Hmph. You have all grown too spoiled. This life, too easy for you. I can assure you, that life will change,” whispered the One with the Crazy Grin. As she spoke, a smile on her face grew. “You will all become worthy to the One who has blessed us all. You will become worthy,” she shouted. Her dark eyes looked lifeless against her pale skin.

“Visa. Ola. You have been found deficient,” she casually announced. Visa and Ola moaned. Punishment would begin.

Visa and Ola continued to wail out loud. Ola walked forward towards the One with the Crazy Grin. Visa remained standing on the red stone. She refused to move and her cries increased in volume. In the middle of her cry, she pleaded.

“Mistress Donnis. Please. Please forgive me. I promise to do better.”

The dark grandmother chuckled. Her ruby lips spread widely into a smile across her pale, white skin.

“Do not call out to me, girl. If you are found lacking, you will be of no use to the Wolf,” said the One with the Crazy Grin. “And that goes for all of you. We do not need that many of you. We can send you to another place if you do not become a dark grandmother.”

Julietta and I exchanged looks. What did she mean by that? No other dark grandmother had mentioned being sent anywhere else. No future existed beyond being a dark grandmother. Except for Nadine, other red hoods always left and returned as dark grandmothers. As far as I knew. Maybe Nadine was out there somewhere.

“Visa. Just. Stop,” said the One with the Crazy Grin matter-of-factly. “How quickly all of you abandoned your duties. And during a time when the Wolf expects us to show our faith in his teachings. You faithless bunch. Already assumed we would not return, did you now? The other dark grandmothers sent me back shortly into our journey. You girls needed a strong grandmother during these trying times. And need me, you did.”

As the cries lessened, Visa's body betrayed her as it shook. Visa behaved as if she had never been punished before. Ola was the calmer one and she rarely did anything to warrant punishment. I, of course, had been punished a couple of times. My mistress hated to punish her girls, so she mercifully gave us one to two hits. But the One with the Crazy Grin always punished her girls much harsher than other red hoods' mistresses. When the One with the Crazy Grin became too hostile and wouldn't cease, other dark grandmothers would intervene, angering the One with the Crazy Grin more. Unlike the other dark grandmothers, Tilly avoided creating additional conflict between herself and this horrible dark grandmother. Tilly would not stop the One with the Crazy Grin.

Mistress Donnis's face scrunched up as she eyed Visa. Watching Visa cry and the dark grandmother smile angered me.

"This will not work, my dear." Mistress Donnis turned to look at the rest of us. "In fact, no excuses will be permitted. Ever!" She walked up to each red hood and forcefully pulled the tops of our hoods down, covering our faces more. When she reached me, I pulled my own hood down and lowered my face. The dark grandmother stopped in front of me. While she did not touch me with her always disgustingly wet hands, her stale stench floated into my nostrils. Breathing through my mouth seemed to do little to alleviate the smell.

"Good, good. For once, the naughty one listens. Do you all see this? All of you should complete your work and honor the Wolf with your lives *without* prompting. If I have to remind you of the simplest virtues of being a red hood, you will get the rod daily! Life is changing now. You might thank me later. Starting now, you will work and you will work earlier and later. Do you understand?"

No red hood would answer as speaking without being addressed could earn a punishment.

"Answer me!"

"Yes, Dark Grandmother Donnis," said all red hoods in unison.

"Now all of you, stay completely still. If I hear a sound from any of you, you will join Visa and Ola. Visa, you will be first. Take your slippers off. I will get your feet after your hands."

A few red hoods gasped.

"Shut it, all of you," barked the One with the Crazy Grin.

Dark grandmothers never used rods on our feet. How would they work in the garden later with pained hands and feet?

Short snaps pierced the air. This punishment required the use of the metal rod, not the wooden one used from time to time. Rough patches covered this rod, and if you had a merciful mistress, she would hit your hands using the side with no metal spurs. No mercy would appear today. The snaps continued much longer with no dark grandmother to intervene. With each snap, my mind drifted. Drifted to a better time with Nadine. As I searched through my better memories, I let sounds of the hatred of the dark grandmother fade until it was all over.

Chapter Seven

Once I allowed my mind to drift, I let myself think about Nadine's final words to me. During her last day in the village, I stopped speaking to Nadine. Nadine was unlike my other little sisters. I grieved at the idea of her becoming a dark grandmother because she could no longer help me. Her new role would change the way she would speak to me if she ever spoke to me again.

"I'm not going to be long but take care of yourself," said Nadine. Head down, I ignored Nadine for the first time. "Hey, sister."

Those two words sunk deeply into my heart and brightened my spirit. Especially the solitary word, sister. Red hoods were little sisters or red hoods to each other. I meant something to Nadine; something that I could not quite define. But I felt a sense of belonging because we shared a relationship that no others shared. This relationship allowed me to have conversations that I could not have with other red hoods. This relationship had provided protection for me many times; Nadine used her position as a trusted red hood to explain away many of my transgressions. And no begging, no requesting, no work was required to gain favor with Nadine. Yet all of this would end soon.

When I finally looked at Nadine, she returned my sad look with concerned green eyes seated among thick copper eyelashes. As always, her eyes widened with concern. Of course, becoming a dark grandmother was always the goal, but Nadine provided more to our village by just being who she was. Because she would be a dark grandmother soon, her joy-giving presence did little to dispel my mood.

"Don't worry about me. You'll be like the others and forget all about me. They all change. Even *you* will change," I said.

"Not so, Daphine. We all look forward to changing but I will still be me. How about I promise something?," said Daphine. "She pulled a coiled loop of pale red hair from her pocket. "Take this."

"What is this for?" I asked.

"When I return, give this to me."

"But, what do I do with it for now?" I asked. Nadine laughed.

"Nothing. Hold on to it for me. When I return, give it back to me. It may help cheer me up. Don't forget this will be the only hair that I will have

left.”

I grabbed the hair from Nadine, understanding that this piece of hair may become the closest connection I have to Nadine.

“You’ll be strange with no hair,” I responded forlornly.

“I’ll still have these, though.” She pointed to her freckles on her face and poked her lips out in a funny way.

“But you won’t be here anymore. And you will be a dark grandmother to a different red hood. You know you will have different responsibilities.”

“Daphine, this is so unlike you. We all work together to help everyone here,” said Nadine. “Everything is going to be alright,” she said.

“No, Nadine. It can’t be.”

“It can. Have I ever been wrong?” she asked.

Nadine’s continual optimism helped shroud me from the life that we lived. I’m not sure if she meant to, but her presence prevented me from recognizing that most mistresses maintained households where red hoods appeared lonely, scared, or both.

A large thud broke into the replay of my memories. I chanced a look and noticed a robe sprawled on the ground. Ola collapsed under the weight of the hateful punishment of the One with the Crazy Grin. And no, Nadine had never been wrong before but she was today.

Absolutely nothing was going to be alright.

~

“Hmph. Worthless. The first generation of red hoods needed no punishment,” said the One with the Crazy Grin.

I chanced peering over at Ola. Down on the ground, Ola attempted many times, unsuccessfully, to pick herself up. Dark red and purple marks marred her hands and feet. With a red face and downturned eyes, she quickly grabbed her slippers. With one arm, Ola held the slippers against her body. With her other arm, she attempted to support her body enough to stand. She failed again. Small pools of blood, which had developed on the tops of her hands, started to break and leave trails across her hands. Ola continued to attempt to rise. When she caught me looking at her, she pressed her lips together, shoved her slippers in her pockets, and rose with one solid push.

No one likes a red hood who constantly chastises other red hoods and educates us on the “laws.” But today, Ola earned my respect, and possibly that of other red hoods. Once standing, she fixed her eyes on the One with

the Crazy Grin. This gaze was defiant and could earn her another punishment.

“Excuse me, um, Mistress Dark Grandmother Donniss.” Tilly spoke up, finally. Her voice had changed, resembling the frightened voice of her days as a red hood. She jogged over to the One with the Crazy Grin, taking care to place herself in front of Ola.

“Tilly! Don’t address me as Mistress Dark Grandmother Donniss,” mocked Grandmother Donniss. “You are a dark grandmother. Behave as such. Don’t disgrace your position.”

“Certainly. Can, can I help...No. Can I get Ola to the garden. She is supposed to be working this morning, and I will oversee her work. We can’t have red hoods shirking their responsibilities because of a little punishment, right?” Tilly gave a dry laugh. “There’s a lot of work that needs to be done. Maybe Visa can join as well.”

“Of course, Dark Grandmother Tilly. But Visa has cleaning responsibilities today. Let’s choose another red hood to join Ola. Or perhaps, a red hood would like to volunteer.”

“I can do it, Mistress Donniss, if you permit me. Thank you for the opportunity to serve the Wolf,” I said. Mistress Donniss raised an eyebrow, most likely due to my overly gracious attitude towards the Wolf. Volunteering for garden work ensured that I would need to do arduous work, but it also gave me an opportunity to take on additional work which would lessen that of Ola.

“See, all of you. Even the most wayward red hood can be molded. All of you are dismissed. Remember, the Wolf is always watching.”

Faking a cough, I masked my laugh. Does the Wolf really see everything? I had committed many mistakes before and received no punishment because Nadine covered for me or I remained undiscovered.

Tilly’s eyes widened.

“Let’s go Ola. Let’s go Daphine.”

Tilly walked north from the village center. I walked a few steps behind them. Tilly walked strangely close to Ola, as their robes touched. Frankly, it seemed that Tilly was staying close enough to Ola so that she could catch Ola if she fell. Dark grandmothers never held, supported, or assisted red hoods. Red hoods existed to support and assist the dark grandmothers and the Wolf. If Ola did fall, Tilly would risk angering the One with the Crazy

Grin again. Walking behind Ola, her gait gradually appeared more uneven and unstable. She would fall soon but the garden was not far.

No red hood was safe with the One with the Crazy Grin ruling. Maybe one of the other dark grandmothers survived. And as much as I hate to think it, maybe the Wolf may be better.

The Wolf consumes flocks. Resist the Wolf.

That voice again. Those words resounded in my mind. The words themselves beckoned me from a faraway place. More importantly, what did the first set of words mean? My heart quickened as I wanted to agree. The Wolf wasn't here. But I would gladly accept the help of anyone who could end the pain that Mistress Donnis planned to inflict upon us. So yes, let's resist.

With each step towards the garden, Ola's body shook. But she would not fall, as I assumed before. With face turned upward, Ola walked fairly quickly, all while rebuffing Tilly's attempts to get her to rest. Did Ola do this to show other red hoods that Ola was superior to us in another way? I was not certain. Or had she finally accepted that our little world dealt unfairness at every opportunity? Tilly, on the other hand, seemed much more unnerved. After almost tumbling over Ola's robe, Tilly glanced back at me. Yes, I saw, Tilly. Her eyes flashed in a way, unfamiliar for her but common for other dark grandmothers. I lowered my eyes so Tilly would turn around. She could punish me for witnessing a deficiency in her. But she would not.

Regardless, I restrained myself from challenging Tilly. The events of the last day really did not alter anything. Donning a darker version of my robe represented my future. And this future was a small number of days away. How fleeting my hope of a few moments ago was. After all, what could this unknown voice do for me?

Garden work would be incredibly difficult today. Sowing season had started. Red hoods would need to prepare the earth so that we could plant wheat and our other crops. Especially wheat. While we had stored some wheat, our previous wheat harvests had disappointed. Our stores could only last for a few more months. And optimism skewed that estimate by a lot. Julietta planted a few seedlings to test the ground and the seedlings remained lifeless. This harvest was vital.

Tilly pushed her body against one of the plows in disgust. It did not budge. Of our two plows, one needed to be repaired before it could be used

again. The remaining plow, though, was much heavier, therefore, much more difficult to pull through the dirt.

“Dark Grandmother Tilly.” Tilly looked up at me. Frustration filled her face. “Can I assist?”

“Of course, girl.” She stepped to the side and took a seat on the stone bench with Ola. “This is the work of red hoods,” said Tilly.

“Wait—let me help you,” said Ola. She started to rise from the bench.

“No!” yelled Tilly. “It’s just that...you will just mess it up. Girl, don’t you know this is our last plow? Take a look at yourself. You need to take better care of yourself. Stay there. Give me a moment and I will show you how to do it.”

Tilly left, leaving me to start my battle with the plow. Instead of pushing it, I pulled while lifting the plow. It did not budge. Unable to pull anymore, I let myself rest by kneeling down to examine the wheels. Mud and a large rock had dried on a wheel, blocking its movement. Taking care to not ruin the wheel, I used another stone to knock the other one off the plow.

Once I cleared the obstruction, I removed some of the wet soil from the middle of my hood. The soil left in my hands felt odd. I could not tell you why, but it felt wrong. Tilly returned with a small basket and with Mistress Donnis’s horse.

“Dark Grandmother Tilly, I think-”

“Come get her, Daphine.” Tilly patted the horse.

Thankfully, Mistress Donnis’s horse was relatively calm, letting me attach the plow to her with ease. My thoughts about the soil should remain with me. After all, I would not be able to explain why I wondered about the soil. No reason to risk a dark grandmother accusing me of being a saboteur if the harvest failed again. As I plowed, Tilly started tending to Ola’s wounds. Ola remained unusually silent.

“Take better care of your feet.” Tilly soaked long strips of cloth in disinfectant before wrapping them around Tilly’s bloody feet. No red hood had ever received such lashings upon their feet. Once Tilly finished wrapping Ola’s wounds, they stayed still and watched as I plowed the ground. As I started to plow farther from them, Ola stood up.

“It’s time, Daphine. I need to do the rest.” Ola called out.

“That’s not necessary, Ola” interrupted Tilly. She yelled and motioned for me to continue.

Ola turned to Tilly and said something that silenced Tilly. Tilly, now standing, sat again, and looked away.

Ola walked over to me.

“Hey, what did you say to her?” I asked.

"It is time for me to make myself useful. You should try it sometimes."

With bandaged hands, Ola picked up the plow. She yelled, "Let's move, girl."

Chapter Eight

The opportunity to finish garden work early gave me some time to myself, not exactly common for red hoods. But of course, what should I do? What if I walked into the One with the Crazy Grin? She knew that I should be at the garden or in the fields, so she may very well punish me for being unproductive. No, I could not directly walk through the village. Naturally, I backtracked to the garden and the fields. Tilly, still seated at the bench, continued to look away. Stewing. Embarrassed. Probably angry that a red hood would dare speak to her. But probably too scared and spineless to do anything about it.

Red hoods will honor the dark grandmothers.

Another commandment. Another failure. With Mistress Donnis around, I really need to start to do better when it comes to Tilly. Silence. No squeaky wheels yelled. Why was everything so quiet?

Ola had stopped plowing. On her knees, she seemed to be examining the plow's wheel and the ground. I walked over to her.

"Stuck again, huh?" I asked.

Ola stayed silent. She began pulling on something *in* the ground.

"Ouch."

She jumped back and grabbed her hand.

"Let me help."

What is this? Dark bluish green branches had invaded the ground. Beneath the one that Ola had pulled, they seemed to be bound in coils. I placed a finger underneath one, hoping to get a better look at it.

"Be careful," Ola cautioned. "There's something prickly on it."

Whatever it was, it didn't quite feel like a branch. It resembled a slimmer branch but it was smoother and had more flexibility. And the knots protruded. Like spikes. The temple book contained random writings about this. Thorns. The knots were thorns. Bundles of dark red pods and leaves emerged from these branches. Plowing must have disrupted the ground enough to get one branch wrapped firmly around one of the wheels.

"Do you have something to get this cut off?" I asked.

"It's not happening. Tried to cut it off. It's not going anywhere."

Obviously, this had never happened before. Did the Northern Mountain and the shaking have something to do with this?

“What are you thinking?” Ola asked. A small trail of blood started to seep from underneath the cloths on her hands.

After quickly grabbing a spade hanging on the side of the plow, I walked over to an undisturbed part of the land. With a little bit of digging, the spade hit a solid obstruction. After placing the spade underneath the obstruction, I pulled out a small part of a similar bendy branch. Strange. I did not notice anything wrong when I plowed. After examining the areas of the ground that Ola and I had already plowed, the ground was, well, normal. Testing the ground farther out, farther north, revealed more of the small branches with thorns. How could we plant in this ground?

Ola watched in silence and her face reflected concern.

“Don’t worry about finishing for now. But we need to report this to the dark grandmother.”

“Do you want to be the one to tell Mistress Donnis?” Ola’s eyes widened.

I shook my head. Avoiding interactions with the Crazy One with the Grin as much as possible would ensure my body stayed unmarred.

“I’m not going anywhere near that woman.”

I glanced at Tilly. Still unmoved. I nodded towards Tilly.

“She’s a dark grandmother. Report it to her. We only have a responsibility to report this to a dark grandmother.”

Ola nodded in agreement and relief.

Both of us walked over to Tilly. Surely, Tilly knew that we had been discussing something.

“Mistress Tilly. The ground is not right,” I said. “An invasive plant is growing in the ground.”

Tilly finally turned and looked up at us.

“Not right? What do you mean by that?” Mistress Tilly asked.

“See for yourself. It’s possible that we are mistaken,” Ola said sarcastically. Tilly’s pale face grimaced when she locked eyes with Ola.

Ola and I sat down on the bench as Tilly walked over to the plow. She stared at the ground and did not bother to examine the unknown plant nestled in the ground. Instead, she glanced over at us, and walked back towards the village, all the while biting her fingers.

~

Flashes of images filled my mind as I woke from sleep. Just as I thought I would wake, I drifted deeper into the images. Haziness encapsulated these

images, making it difficult for me to see. But suddenly, the images became clearer and I found myself walking among trees. Strangely, I seemed shorter than I normally am. And my body seemed to be controlled by someone else. An unknown thing paralyzed my body, my voice, and my vision while forcing me to be a participant of something. Whoever I was kept turning and looking left, right, and behind.

Trees filled this place. It looked similar to a forest, not like the barren one forbidden to red hoods. Not that I had ever been in a forest from earlier times before, but our teacher had described one that looked remarkably similar to this. Since little light broke through the canopy of the leaves and branches, this person traveled in the early morning or in the late evening. The dim light decreased the person's visibility. The trees ahead blended together, blocking the person from seeing ahead. I wondered if this person was lost or looking for someone. Certainly, no one could travel this area easily. A light whisper floated on a strange breeze. Either I, or this unknown person, felt a chill and shivered. We started to walk faster. Because of the trees, the person could not walk straight forward. As we walked around trees, we eventually fell over a raised tree root.

That is when I saw it. The bottom of a red hood. It was slightly different than the ones that we wore as strange symbols embroidered the bottom of the gown. Before I had a chance to see more, the red hood panicked and stood quickly, and kept walking. All the while looking frantically at the surroundings. Almost expecting someone to appear. A sharp rustle forced the red hood to stop. She did not move. Without understanding why, my heart pounded loudly.

"Come out," the small voice yelled with courage.

Dark gray fur moved from behind one of the trees. One amber colored orb peered beyond the tree and stared at us.

"I said come out. I'm getting my sister!"

The dark furry frame stirred. It gave a deep rumbling laugh that seemed to echo throughout the forest.

This creature moved from behind the tree. When the creature stepped out, the creature resembled our patron, the Wolf. But he looked less like the sculptured image. Our patron walked upright. This creature walked on all fours like a horse, and with no clothes. A dark red substance - looked a lot like blood - matted parts of his fur. If it was blood, was it his? A bright red tongue lashed about as he looked back and forth for something. Or

someone. What was he looking for? We were in front of him. The young red hood silently crouched and pulled the hood tighter around her body. She kept our eyes fixated on this wolf.

He lifted his nose and sniffed the air. His laugh vibrated in the air.

“You’ve had help, I see. No matter, I will find you,” he hissed.

He walked back and forth and gave a howl. His feet sliced through some of the roots of the trees. The grin that moved across his face exposed blood.

“They all get into line, eventually.”

Why did the red hood ask this wolf to reveal himself? She remained silent and in the crouched position. She only moved her head to keep her eyes on the wolf. Shining light flashed into one of her eyes. She looked down. The light - which had started to break more into the forest - reflected off the tip of a small, silver blade. A red hood was going to harm a wolf. But was this wolf our patron? I thought he was the only one.

The wolf sniffed again. His grin faded and his face dropped. He could not find the red hood.

“Hmph. Stay hidden. I’ll be back for you.”

With one last howl, the Wolf sprinted away. I continued to hear the same ominous howl as I woke up.

~

“Why are we doing this now?” whined Julietta. Like the rest of us, her fingers had become raw from the endless sewing.

All red hoods sat on the stony ground, working. Various hooded robes, of crimson, black, and gold, laid in a pile on a stone seat. Whenever conversion time neared for a red hood, all red hoods cleaned and patched the various hoods. No red hood would admit it, but as our fingers became numb, we would skip over repairing red hoods, provided the worn spots were well hidden from the judging eyes of a dark grandmother. No one dared, however, spare their complete attention to repairing and preparing hoods for a dark grandmother and a converting red hood.

Mistress Donnis woke us up earlier than usual to start this task. Seemed too soon to start doing this, but no one would argue with Mistress Donnis. And the quiet, but laborious, work would mean that Mistress Donnis should leave us alone for a while.

“Shut it, Julietta,” snarled Cecilia. Her face resembled that of a dark grandmother, twisted and pale. “We prepare for his return. Daphine and I will probably be the first red hoods since the terrible event.” Cecilia’s eyes

darkened as she grinned just as darkly as Mistress Donnis. Julietta snickered.

“No talking,” Visa added. Cecilia glowered at Visa. Visa dropped her head and returned to repairing a hole in a hood, most likely hers. She was right. Because of the importance of this work, red hoods should only speak if discussing working on the hoods.

In the background, a series of three short but loud bangs could be heard. Probably Mistress Donnis doing something we would despise.

Julietta looked around me and narrowed her eyes. Cecilia's presence subdued my urge to ask Julietta what she was looking at.

“Maisie, be careful with the embroidery. Last time, you pulled the thread too tight and ripped the fabric,” I cautioned.

Maisie nodded. She never spoke. Strangely the dark grandmothers never minded her silence. Her two-colored eyes, amber and blue, never ceased to draw my attention. Today, however, what she held in her hand grabbed my attention. A thick ribbon woven with gold and black threads hung from her left hand as Maisie struggled to push the needle through the thick material. The ribbon reminded me of the embroidery on the bottom of the hood in my dream. I wondered if the design on the bottom of the hood in my dream meant anything. Even though the symbols differed from what we placed on the bottom of the conversion hood, it had to mean something. The twisting black and gold threads signified that a red hood had been accepted by the Wolf. Supposedly, you could place it on your body after he accepted you. If you were not accepted, the hood would be burned. At least, that's what Dark Grandmother Ruby said. We took great care with these hoods because they had been worn by all other converted red hoods.

“That one will be yours, Daphine. Write it down,” said Cecilia.

I set down the red hood that I was repairing and I grabbed a small but old book, near the pile of robes. Because of the weight of the golden covers, I needed to lift the book with two hands. I opened the old, tired book, and of course flipped through the names. Each entry documented every time a hood was prepared for a dark grandmother for the first time or for a red hood facing conversion. We also included the name of the red hood who prepared the hood. A dark grandmother's name should be listed twice after her conversion. My hands hesitated when I reached the last page with writing. Nadine. Her name was only listed once. I gave my customary blinks to secure my eyes from expressing my feelings.

As I etched Maisie's and my names into the book, I trembled, creating a messy entry. Was it my destiny to be listed in this book only once? Did I want to only be listed once? I could feel Cecilia's eyes on me, measuring my attitude towards converting soon. Unsure of whether or not I was successful, I attempted to project a flat but slightly assured face. Who knows if Cecilia approved of what she saw?

More bangs sounded in the distance. "And what are they doing?" Julietta whispered loudly.

Unable to quell my curiosity, I turned around and watched as Dark Grandmothers Tilly and Donnis used axes to cut through branches that looked a whole lot like what was in the field. They dropped the pieces in a metal structure we used for burning things.

Ola snickered.

"We're not going to have a harvest this year."

Chapter Nine

We worked in silence pulling up the undesirable plant life in the ground. Ola's words from the day before may become our reality.

"Over there! Yes, there. Pull. Pull, girl! Leave none of those pests behind," said the One with the Crazy Grin. She pronounced pests with disgust.

We had woken to the dark grandmothers' banging on our doors. We simply had to eliminate this "enemy." Her rants did not only target the ground, though. We had pulled up and burned a large number of the branches; few should remain in the ground. Unfortunately, the One with the Crazy Grin blamed our deficiencies and our laziness on the state of the ground. Walking back and forth in the field, she became excited when we excavated more of the plant. If a poor red hood dug in a spot with no issues, the One with the Crazy Grin screamed and threatened to use the rod again. Ola's newfound defiance faded in the presence of the One with the Crazy Grin.

"Gimme, gimme," said the One with the Crazy Grin when I uncovered more of the plant. She pulled the plant out of my hands, clawing the insides of my hands. Pain would have to wait as any verbal response could enrage her.

"Donnis, oh my." Tilly pointed towards the stables. A sea of dark hoods moved under the dying light towards us. Every dark grandmother had returned. As expected, the dark grandmothers appeared tired but their eyes widened as they examined what must have looked like a horrid scene. Dirt covered most of the red hoods' clothing, hands, and faces.

"Look, they have all returned. I'm not alone." Tilly's voice broke.

"Careful," said Mistress Donnis. She lifted her sharp black eyebrows in warning.

Tilly ignored Mistress Donnis. Tilly stood up and started walking towards the other dark grandmothers. She tripped over her hood but continued towards them.

"It's in the ground. We can't get rid of it," Tilly hollered out.

"Manage yourself. Have respect for your station," cautioned Dark Grandmother Ruby. She pushed Tilly out of the way and examined a pile of the branches. Using her hood, she grabbed one of the branches.

“The Black ice is cracking,” yelled Dark Grandmother Perdita, who had a propensity to punish just as harshly as the One with the Crazy Grin. She pointed to me and then whispered something in another’s ears and whatever she said made this Dark Grandmother’s face turn whiter and her eyes, darker. With long bony fingers she pulled back her dark hood and started to lift her gown. Four grandmothers swarmed around the two half-crazed grandmothers blocking them from view and ushering them away. What did this mean? Why did the dark grandmothers identify me as a culprit for the strange going-ons. My own survival should have become my main focus but I had never seen the dark grandmothers so scared; I wondered if they would be punished for the outcry, that expression of grief. Actually, I had never seen them scared before at all. My mistress, one of the younger looking grandmothers, kept a blank look on her face.

“The black ice is cracking as you all have seen,” said my mistress. Her words were measured and slow. “We must prepare ourselves now. We knew this day would come.”

“We’ve done everything He has ever asked. This can be undone. We cannot let this happen,” said Dark Grandmother Ruby.

“And we won’t.” My mistress stared me in the eyes. Did they know what I had seen? “The Wolf lives and He will prepare us.”

At the mention of the Wolf, Cecilia began to rock back and forth. Our conversion would begin soon, just as Cecilia wanted.

The murmuring between dark grandmothers ceased. Every pair of eyes shifted to Cecilia. On her knees, Cecilia still rocked slowly back and forth. Dirty upturned hands signaled her worship of the Wolf. Her closed eyes did not hide her glee. Did she enjoy this because she pulled all the attention to her? Or did she actually connect to the Wolf and receive acknowledgment from the Wolf himself? Pressed lips did not disguise her smile. Her behavior alarmed the red hoods. Maisie’s quiet disposition changed to a look of concern. Visa turned away. Julietta’s eyes widened. I could not say if Julietta was disgusted or afraid. Ola shook her head and returned to pulling the branches out of the ground. I moved next to Starcy as she was concerned enough to try to help Cecilia.

While the experience in the temple had left me unchanged, the experience altered Cecilia for the worst. The voice uncovered my already existing doubts about our world. The voice ignited a fierce loyalty within Cecilia. Was she doing all of this to prove that she had not listened to that

voice in the temple? To prove that she remained uncorrupted by this invisible enemy of the Wolf.

Cecilia appeared to connect deeply with the Wolf, both like and unlike a dark grandmother. Dark grandmothers worshiped the Wolf in the same way, but they did so during designated times of worship. Whenever dark grandmothers behaved similarly, I doubted that they had a genuine connection to the Wolf. Not so with Cecilia. The dark grandmothers recognized this. Dark Grandmother Ruby fiddled with her robe, pulling on it. Dark Grandmother Miriam, my mistress, appeared pleased with Cecilia.

“Dark Grandmother Tilly, take Cecilia to the temple,” ordered Mistress Miriam. Tilly walked to Cecilia and hesitated. Who would want to get near her in this state? “Cecilia,” said my mistress softly. She reserved that voice for privately addressing Nadine, Starcy, and me. During my time here, that soft voice was one of a handful of acts of kindness. Mistress Miriam never ceased to project a stiff and neutral demeanor towards other red hoods in the village. Her time at the Northern Mountain had done something. Likely, all red hoods wanted more details about what happened at the Northern Mountain. But we could not ask anything.

“Continue your worship in the temple. Your dark grandmothers will join you there,” said Mistress Miriam. She continued to address Cecilia in her soft voice. Cecilia opened her eyes and walked towards the temple. Tilly walked precariously behind her.

Are they going to test her today? She is not thirteen yet. All dark grandmothers assembled in the temple with a red hood to test a newly thirteen red hood’s Sight. This was the first test that red hoods passed before leaving to start conversion. I would surely fail if the dark grandmothers tested me today. Was it possible to pretend to have no Sight?

“The Wolf has a word for all of you red hoods,” said Dark Grandmother Miriam, my mistress. She watched me as she spoke. Normally cool, she looked tense. Her neck appeared longer than usual, as the sides of her neck appeared highly strung. “Line up outside the temple. We will call you in one by one. The Wolf’s word for you is for you alone. Swift judgment will be doled out for those who discuss the Wolf’s message with another. Expect immediate disqualification from conversion.”

Mistress Miriam walked towards the temple, with the other dark grandmothers walking in a line behind her.

I felt a tug on my arm. I looked down at Starcy. “Does that mean I can’t discuss what I find out with you,” asked Starcy. This would be disappointing, but I was more worried about the contents of the Wolf’s message for me. Obviously, the dark grandmothers received information about me that they did not like.

“What do you think, Daphine?” asked Julietta.

“I don’t know. Cecilia gets their ear first, though. What is Cecilia going to tell them?”

“Nothing to tell,” Julietta shrugged. “If you’re worried about us finding you outside the temple, don’t be. I gave Cecilia some story about you checking on everyone and making sure the younger red hoods got to their dwellings. And that’s exactly what you were doing, right?”

“Right.” I nodded. Metallic blood dripped into my mouth. I had not bitten the inside of my lips in years. Out of all of the times that I spent worrying about being eligible to be a dark grandmother, this may actually be the day where the dark grandmothers definitively disqualify me.

“Do you think they will tell us what happened up at the Northern Mountain? They walked back in here as if nothing’s wrong. Not a scratch on them, either,” Julietta whispered as we walked towards the temple.

“And they are back sooner than they should be. It takes days to reach the Northern Mountain. They’re hiding something but they will never tell us anything. We’ll have to find out on our own,” I said.

“From a dark grandmother? Never!” Julietta whispered.

“Quiet,” warned Dark Grandmother Ruby.

Julietta and I constantly exchanged positions. We could not decide if we really wanted to be the last person to walk in. I assumed that this would be a simple drop-the-word-of-the-Wolf event, quickly pushing each red hood out of the temple. Instead, the dark grandmothers detained each red hood for enough time to make each of us worried. Especially since Cecilia left the temple in the shortest time and with the largest grin that she could muster. Did she wear a smile because the Wolf gave her a reason to be happy, or did she pull a smile over her face to hide her true feelings? This new Cecilia could not be trusted. My feelings were not exclusive to me, though. When Cecilia left the temple, every red hood stepped back to let her through. Whatever was off about her pushed us all away. Under the dim light, Cecilia’s grin resembled that of the One with the Crazy Grin. This grin was not one of happiness. This grin reflected a wicked desire to inflict harm

upon another. Who did Cecilia intend to hurt as she transitioned to becoming a dark grandmother?

Other red hoods did not receive an enlightening or joyous word from the Wolf. No one dared speak a word for fear that Dark Grandmother Ruby, standing outside the temple, would accuse us of sharing our secret message with another. Dark Grandmother Ruby monitored us at the front of the temple. I wondered if she could hear what the other dark grandmothers shared with the red hoods. Though silent, her eyes scanned each of us once a red hood left the temple. The combination of her muscular face and her lack of eyebrows made it difficult for me to read how she felt. I watched as she compressed her wide, thin lips each time a red hood left the temple. Did she hope to read our faces and foresee which of us would break?

Maisie left with a frown. Ola ran back to her mistress's dwelling. One by one, red hoods left the temple with stony faces that avoided eye contact. Julietta's fear far exceeded my own so I let her keep the last spot in line. With more fortitude than me, Starcy proudly walked in before me. And like Cecilia, her visit was short. And like Cecilia, she left smiling. She hobbled towards me and hugged me.

"No touching," barked Dark Grandmother Ruby.

Starcy pulled away and stood next to Julietta. Dark Grandmother Ruby used her head to motion for me to get into the temple. Two fears now filled my mind: finding out what the Wolf had to say and getting near the Book. Did the Wolf know? And what if my mind drifted or if I heard something? Could I hide it from the dark grandmothers? Maybe. But my mistress knew me better than the other dark grandmothers; she would easily detect if I hid anything.

"I'll wait here for you and Julietta," said Starcy. Julietta's face relaxed with relief.

"Don't make your dark grandmothers wait," said Dark Grandmother Ruby.

The dark grandmothers stood in front of the book, blocking it from view. The wide range of expressions on the dark grandmothers' faces confused me. A few angry faces turned away when I looked at them. Strangely, the One with the Crazy Grin wore a smile that did not seem to have a hidden threat behind it. My mistress, however, maintained a blank face with me. Her thin hand, strangely stained with ink, pulled a small, ornate knife out of her pocket. The knife resembled the knife that I saw in my dream.

“Come forward, Daphine.” She pronounced my name with such force.
Was she afraid for me?

“Go on, girl,” said Dark Grandmother Perdita.

Once I was in front of my mistress, the remaining dark grandmothers encircled me.

“Your time as a red hood has come to an end,” said Mistress Miriam.

Chapter Ten

“Your time as a red hood has come to an end. Are you ready, red hood, to finally become more?”

Of course, I wasn't ready, but those words would never leave my lips. This day's arrival, while a certainty, was always going to arrive and dismantle my world. But I felt that day would always bring an ending similar to Nadine's. Yet my mistress's words dropped pieces of hope into my heart.

For the first time in my life, becoming a dark grandmother appeared a possibility. All of my strange desires were so unlike the nature of a dark grandmother. All of my failures made me a poor red hood. In spite of my shortcomings, the dark grandmothers, for once, revealed that I was ready. Dread, instead of relief, weighted my shoulders, though. Why had they made this decision?

Though the room was dark, a small glow of the book emanated from behind Dark Grandmother Perdita. With no one reading, the book should remain darkened. Was I imagining this? Or did someone or something, possibly the Wolf's enemy, want to reach out at this moment? Before my face could betray my thoughts to the prying dark grandmothers, I chanced questioning my mistress.

“Thank the Wolf for this opportunity. Will you need me to wait to leave the village? My Sight still remains so I can still serve.” Silence would have been a better response; my shaky words informed the dark grandmothers of my fear.

“No, you must prepare to leave quickly.” My mistress turned and locked eyes with someone behind me. I turned my head, hoping to see who.

“Starting tomorrow, your training will begin.”

“I accept the privilege to serve the Wolf,” I said.

“Things will be different.” Her voice deepened in a way that I had not heard before. And what was that expression? Was it jealousy or anger. “It has been our way to let red hoods lose sight at thirteen and join the ranks of dark grandmothers immediately thereafter. But the Wolf has commanded us to quicken this process. For the enemy of the Wolf comes. And that brings me to two messages for you.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“The Wolf has decided that you will not be a dark grandmother.”

What? What could possibly begin for me tomorrow if I could not become a dark grandmother. Before I could process this, my mistress continued speaking, ignoring my obviously ill-looking face.

“Re-emergence of the enemy has pushed the Wolf to make plans. I heard that you witnessed the disturbance at the Northern Mountain, yes?”

I nodded.

“That was evidence of the enemy’s attempt to break down our world and destroy everyone in it. The enemy may continue his attacks but the Wolf’s powers are unparalleled,” my mistress said.

“That’s right,” interrupted Dark Grandmother Perdita. “That’s right.”

“Our Voice of the Wolf, she has monitored the recent events and prepares to help the Wolf eliminate the enemy. Now, this is history only shared between dark grandmothers, but the Wolf started our village with two Voices of the Wolf. The Wolf requires two again. And that honor will be earned by you or Cecilia.

“Don’t think, it’ll be given. Do you underst-” said Dark Grandmother Perdita.

“Your preparation begins, but as Dark Grandmother Perdita says, this will not be given. Dark Grandmother Perdita will work with Cecilia. Dark Grandmother Donnis will work with you. Take this seriously! Every action, every word will be measured against or for you.” said my mistress.

Something remained undisclosed behind her words. The One with the Crazy Grin had not stopped fidgeting, with excitement. My mistress grabbed my left hand and placed the small knife in it.

“Your second message, your gift, from the Wolf. Its intended use will be revealed to you later in the process. Keep it close.”

“Yes, mistress,” I said. Cold metal provided relief to my hand, warm from gripping my hood. What could I possibly use this for? And was this the same knife from my dream? Or did my mind play tricks on me? And did Cecilia receive one?

“Daphne?”

“Yes, mistress. Tell no one about what has been spoken here today. Red hoods will be informed of your and Cecilia’s early preparation to become dark grandmothers. They will learn of your or Cecilia’s installment as the Second Voice of the Wolf when we are ready to share that. And let no red hood know of the gift’s existence.”

“Of course, mistress.”

Snickers from the One with the Crazy Grin reminded me that this may not be the honor that a red hood should aim for. Only one thing brought joy to the One with the Crazy Grin: a red hood's failure. And expectedly, Cecilia or I would fail at this task. As great an honor the new Voice of the Wolf would receive, what great punishment and future would await the red hood who failed? And would the One with the Crazy Grin help or hurt me.

~

Only dark grandmothers possessed unfettered access to historical accounts of the Wolf and his founding of our community. Red hoods received filtered information, previously sifted by the Wolf, the Voice of the Wolf, and Dark Grandmother Ruby. Today, other red hoods would receive their usual training and learning but by Dark Grandmother Coda. Dark Grandmother Ruby had summoned Cecilia and I for a private session, but not in our school; instead, Dark Grandmothers Perdita and the One with the Crazy Grin accompanied us from there to a new location. Under the school.

"Girls, move that table there," said the One with the Crazy Grin, pointing at a grayish wooden table, against the side of the building. Our new status apparently did little to diminish the harshness that the One with the Crazy Grin liked to display towards us. A shift occurred, though, for Dark Grandmother Perdita cleared her throat and locked eyes with the One with the Crazy Grin. "Just move it carefully, then. We don't want the Wolf's selections to hurt themselves. All of your focus should be centered on becoming worthy of the selection. With care, slide the crates of tools out." Her all-too-familiar sarcasm dug at my heart, but Dark Grandmother Perdita remained unaffected. She seemed pleased and stepped backward away from us.

Cecilia yelped after she pulled a crate backwards. "Look at that."

"Control yourself, Cecilia," cautioned Dark Grandmother Perdita. "The Wolf will observe you more closely now."

I looked to see what she had found. Hidden beneath the crates, which Dark Grandmother Ruby always threatened us to leave untouched, was a small, wooden door. Removing the crates revealed a shiny, black handle in the middle.

"Remember, you are to tell no one of this," said Dark Grandmother Ruby, standing silently by. "Your sisters will not come outside until we are

finished.” She pulled on the handle of the door. “Stand back.” She pulled the door back, letting it hit the ground with a large bang.

I peeked inside and Cecilia nudged me, almost knocking me down the small set of stone stairs. Did she intend to knock me down the stairs?

“Careful, girl. We haven’t even gotten started yet,” said Dark Grandmother Perdita with a laugh. She walked by, shoving me into the stony wall on the right side.

“Don’t let ‘em get away with it next time. The Wolf is watching,” whispered the One with the Crazy Grin. What did she suppose that I do? Be like her? The One with the Crazy Grin held her hand out, letting me go down the stairs before her. Did this gesture mean something or did she simply do this to outperform Dark Grandmother Perdita’s support of Cecilia. The small hand in my back guided me down the stairs to a small hallway, lit by three lamps. Each lamp cast a bluish-gray glow over three doors. After receiving advisement from Dark Grandmother Perdita, Cecilia walked through the door at the end of the hallway. Lights looked unlike anything I had seen before. Three pairs of skinny and long white lights lined the ceiling.

My mistress and the Voice of the Wolf awaited us with two tables between them. Each table held a mask similar to the Voice of the Wolf’s. The mask closest to the Voice of the Wolf was gold-encrusted with red eyes, red ears, no mouth. The other mask, while plain black, had no eyes, no ears. Its wide, green-jeweled mouth shined brilliantly and reminded me of the Wolf’s smile.

The Voice of the Wolf whispered in my mistress’s ears.

“The Voice of the Wolf and the Wolf expects that His word, His laws, His will shall become secondary to your needs,” proclaimed my mistress. “Blessings from the Wolf can be beautiful burdens. Keep this in mind during the first trial.” Her voice soothed my nerves.

From the tables to chairs, this room looked pristine. Before today, what had this dark place been used for? Floors, walls, tables, and chairs suspiciously held no dust or dirt.

“Let’s begin” whispered my mistress, prompting the four dark grandmothers to all assemble behind the tables, kneel on the ground, and lower their hoods. One by one, each dark grandmother removed her hood, exposing her pale and hairless head, yet the Voice of the Wolf remained masked.

For as long as I could remember, the dark grandmothers, like the red hoods, never showed themselves without their hoods on. Yeah, we know that they had no hair, but seeing them this way scared me. My hidden curiosity to see the dark grandmothers without their hoods had been replaced by pure horror and a wish to make the image of them disappear. The dark grandmothers appeared frail and lesser. It was hard to describe what I was seeing to myself. Hard to acknowledge what they had become or had always been. Before today, the One with the Crazy Grin seemed the oldest. They all looked sick and less imposing. Like this, how could anyone ever fear them? How could anyone ever respect them? They seemed deserving of only one thing: pity. Dark, chunky veins traced the tops of the heads of Dark Grandmother Ruby and the One with the Crazy Grin. Dark Grandmother Perdita and my mistress seemed okay, but the colors of their bald heads were not right. What was wrong with them? This could not possibly be, I don't know, normal. Would the rest of us begin to assume this state?

The One with the Crazy Grin used two of her fingers to motion for me to kneel. Kneeling, I refrained from pulling down my hood, but bowed my head.

Dark Grandmother Perdita cleared her throat, prompting Ceclia to quickly kneel and bow.

"Rise, dark ones," my mistress half-way growled. Her guttural command echoed in the largely empty room.

The Voice of the Wolf watched me. How long had she been watching me?

"Selections, approach the table that is in front of you."

I nodded before stepping forward. Dark Grandmothers always cautioned us to not approach or speak to the Voice of the Wolf.

"The Wolf requires obedience and loyalty from dark grandmothers and red hoods. But the Wolf requires much more of the Voice of the Wolf: submission and total surrender to pain," my mistress said.

Pain? Why would the Voice of the Wolf be in pain?

"If you concern yourself with your needs, you will fail the Wolf. If you concern yourself with what you feel, you will fail the Wolf. If you concern yourself with your thoughts, you will fail the Wolf. If you concern yourself with anyone other than the Wolf," she paused. She directed her attention to me. "You will fail the Wolf. Concern for the Wolf and execution of his will

must be absolute. This is the first of a series of trials which will reveal your heart's intentions to the Wolf. Teachers, direct the selections."

The One with the Crazy Grin leaned forward.

"Pick up the mask. You must be silent. Do you hear me? Stay silent!" Her voice took on a desperate tone, completely unlike her. "Cecilia won't have a problem, the crazy girl. But you must accept all that you see. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Dark Grandmother Donniss."

"Pick up the mask."

How long did I need to wear it? What would happen when I put it on? Would they take us somewhere? While the mask looked heavy, it was surprisingly light. The blackness of the mask seemed blacker than anything that I had seen before. The mask itself was made out of a thin, but rigid material. With the exception of the mouth, the entire mask was plain. I traced the green mouth with my right finger. Under the light, the stones shifted from light green to emerald green to a blackish green. What stones were these?

"No questions!" the One with the Crazy Grin quietly stressed.

"Yes, Dark Grandmother Donniss." I had not intended on asking questions, but the One with the Crazy Grin did not trust me. Before I placed the mask on, I looked at my mistress. That look again. Did she believe that I would fail? Or did she hope that I would fail?

Dark Grandmother Perdita and the One with the Crazy Grin walked around the tables in front of Cecilia and I.

"Place the masks on, selections. Your teachers are permitted to assist," my mistress said.

Dark Grandmother's bony fingers pulled the mask out of my hand. I started to pull my hood down. She grabbed my hand and gripped it tightly.

"Leave your hood on. No one told you to lower it. Stop assuming things," whispered the One with the Crazy Grin. "Assume nothing."

Dark Grandmother Perdita and Cecilia were whispering but I did not dare to look over there.

"Close your eyes, Daphine. Once the mask is on, open them."

"Yes, Dark Grandmother Donniss." She quickly placed the mask on my head and pulled it down over my face and hood. When I opened my eyes, I realized I had returned to the place of my dream or vision. And the Wolf stood directly in front of me.

Chapter Eleven

The Wolf was in front of me. As before, the Wolf stood on all fours. A red hood stood in front of him, and she was perfectly still. Her tan hair, curly like mine, outlined the side of her incredibly young face. If I had to guess, she may have been around Starcy's age. One of her hands was extended in front of her. It appeared that she wanted to touch the side of the Wolf's face. Why would any red hood do this? While forbidden from even staring at the Wolf's statue, why would red hoods ever receive permission to touch the Wolf?

Even though the One with the Crazy Grin cautioned me to be quiet. Was this a test designed for me to step in and stop a red hood from committing a blatant disrespect to the Wolf? Was this expected of the Voice of the Wolf.

Absently, I touched my face. No mask. This was not like that dream as before when I was someone else. My face felt like my face. I was really here but something was wrong about where I was.

I tilted my head to get a better look at the red hood. Not only was she motionless, but she was faceless. Her features were blurred. Who was this red hood? And why did her face look like this when the Wolf appeared sharp in focus? And that's when I noticed everything else.

At first, I assumed the Wolf and the red hood were unaware of my presence. But no, they seemed frozen. And where were we? Like the red hood's face, the background was blurry but colors of tan, crimson, black, and gold shifted and molded over each other. Shades of red drenched down, creating an impression of red hoods. One of the red forms drifted from the surreal background, seeming to break away. The blurry picture of this red hood became clear; it was indeed a red hood yet she wore my face. Literally. She did not look similar to me. She was me. Deep brown curls made their unfortunate appearance at the bottom of her hood. She was a duplicate of me.

I had now forgotten about the faceless hood and the standing wolf. Where was I? What kind of trickery was this? Did the wolf want me to do something? Would I have to follow her lead and do whatever she did? But something was off about the other me. She missed something or maybe I was missing something that she had. She stopped walking forward and

smiled. This smile was foreign to me. The smile contained happiness that I had never, and I wasn't sure if I ever would, bestow upon the Wolf himself.

No, this smile did not come from happiness. This smile revealed a secret, a hidden deed known to the wolf but unknown to everyone else. I looked at the wolf; his eyes looked over the shoulders of the faceless hood, to settle on me, the other me.

What had I done? Or was I going to do something now? After the other me stepped forward a bit, the Wolf eyed the other me and nodded. My other me's right hand reached into the folds of her robe and pulled out the Wolf's gift, the knife. Blood pounded loudly in my ears. I intended on using this gift to inflict harm. I understood that this me was a very possible me. I let myself become this. I had to stop myself. Surely, I couldn't do this. Once the other me began to move slowly behind the red hood, I walked in front of her and she walked through my body. Once I pivoted around, I saw the other me grab the knife much tighter. Maybe I could call out to her, reason with her, stop her.

"Whatever you do, don't speak," cautioned the unknown voice. "This test is designed to elicit a verbal response from you, thereby disqualifying you. The Wolf expects that his poor Voice of the Wolf will watch, and participate in, all his wicked deeds."

What happens to me if I go along with this? What happens if I decide to disobey, and the Wolf finds me deficient?

"You must conquer this test. You must survive. Stay silent. The time will come when you will not be silent. Your voice will be heard. And you will act," said the voice.

It's funny that the owner of this voice can say that. I still don't know a thing about the source. And the owner of the voice is watching this happen. No response from the voice. Of course, the voice remained silent at this.

The other me had stopped behind the red hood. And that is when I noticed something strange about the red hood that I should have noticed before. No red hood was as small as Starcy. Who was she? None of the younger red hoods resembled her. Despite her small frame, though, she projected a physically stronger presence than Starcy. Her head was now tilted to the side. Her face, though blurred, looked tense. The Wolf moved his mouth and spoke something to the red hood. Something that the red hood did not like. As the Wolf spoke, his mouth appeared blurry and moved slowly. The hand of the red hood lowered and the red hood shook her head

slowly. She stopped shaking her head, looked to the right, and went to run. Watching her legs slowly, I could tell that she was trying to move quickly. I felt pain at seeing this red hood squeeze her fists and dig her feet into the ground to get away. Terror was pulling her away from there.

“Stay yourself,” whispered the voice.

My mind yelled as I watched. Why can’t I do something? This is not right.

“I know,” said the voice firmly yet softly. “Hold your tears in.”

I stayed still and watched as the other me chased the small red hood into the blurry void. What did I intend to do once I chased her down? I closed my eyes and bowed my head, focusing on Nadine. Inflicting slight pain by pinching my hand drew enough of my focus to keep me from releasing my tears of grief. Who am I?

“This is the Daphne who accepts becoming the Voice of the Wolf.”

I could not become this person. I could not. Especially for Starcy’s sake. Feeling steadier than before, I released a long breath and then lifted my head. The Wolf’s eyes were upon me. I looked straight into his eyes.

“He’s watching you for a response. Don’t let him see that you are upset. Don’t show concern. Be apathetic.”

What’s apathetic?

“Daphne, show him, *give* him nothing,” said the voice.

Outside this small little pod of reality, a small scream sounded out over the air. The Wolf stepped forward, his feet striking the ground with force. He stepped slowly toward me and stopped in front of my face. Some of the needles of hair on his face touched my own. His eyes narrowed. He waited and breathed harder, blowing his warm breath over my face. He wanted me to react. He wanted me to give him a reason to fail me. That scream again. Did the scream belong to me or to the red hood? Either way, I could not concern myself with that. My focus remained on the Wolf. But I avoided giving him the face that I wanted: despise.

A cloud of darkness descended over my face, concealing my despise and the Wolf’s eyes. In the darkness, I could hear the light, but unnerving, sound of the Wolf breathing on me. To keep myself still, I thought of Starcy. I thought of that unknown girl. The Wolf wanted obedience so I would make him think that I wanted to heed him. But I did not do this out of obedience or out of my fear of the Wolf. After watching a strange me pursue a red hood, I wanted. No, I needed to remain in control.

Something drifted upward over my face. Light filled my eyes blurring my vision. The face of the One with the Crazy Grin appeared. She stared at me with her familiar grin. Except, she seemed pleased. Extremely so.

Every set of eyes seemed poised on me. Especially Cecilia's. She had a look of anger, most likely because she did not expect that I would pass. Yes, I passed Cecilia. I guess Cecilia no longer cared about us both pleasing the Wolf. No one, including myself, expected me to pass.

"Congratulations. The Wolf will let you proceed to the next trial," said the One with the Crazy Grin.

"Thank you, Dark Grandmother Donniss. I will continue to serve the Wolf," I dryly responded.

Pleased with my answer, she turned to face the Voice of the Wolf and my mistress, who appeared neither pleased nor displeased. She seemed disconnected. Wanting to gain a better reaction from my mistress, I bowed in front of her.

"My mistress, I hope you are pleased. Your training has prepared me for this day."

"It is my hope that the Wolf remains pleased with you. I, too, breathe to serve the Wolf. Rise."

I stood and noticed how my mistress still wore her unchanged face. Had she lost whatever modicum of care she had for me? Of course, no one expected much from dark grandmothers, but my mistress always displayed a hint of care to soften the harsh treatment.

"Whatever the Wolf revealed to you shall remain between you and the Wolf. Reveal nothing to the red hoods or to your dark grandmothers. The Wolf's eyes will continue to remain on you, selections," said Dark Grandmother Ruby.

"You're the first red hoods to be invited to be a second Voice of the Wolf," said my mistress. "This position exists for one reason alone: to execute the will of the Wolf. The Wolf has become unhappy with our community. The purity of the lines of red hoods has come under scrutiny. The failures of some of us dark grandmothers and red hoods have endangered our place in this world. Nadine and others were deficient. They were rejected."

"Nadine," I whispered.

"Hush child," said the One with the Crazy Grin. She shoved me.

“You have seen the Northern Mountain. Such destruction will continue to happen when the Wolf’s laws are not upheld,” yelled my mistress.

“These are the things that happen when red hoods permit the machinations of the Wolf’s enemy to infiltrate our community. The appointment of the Voice of the Wolf will ensure an overseer can be here with the red hoods. Daphne, you will do well to remain focused on the Wolf’s needs- “

The Voice of the Wolf walked in front of my mistress, interrupting her and blocking her entirely from my view. Light whispers penetrated the quiet of the air. From my mistress or the Voice of the Wolf, I do not know. Cecilia looked nervous. I wonder what the Voice of the Wolf wanted to say. After the Voice of the Wolf stepped away, my mistress looked down and seemed to dwell on whatever the Voice of the Wolf had spoken to her.

“No matter. You have been selected by the Wolf. The Wolf has outlined a path of absolution for us. We can survive this. We can be restored. You must both continue to the next stage of the trial. The next stage is the Divestiture stage,” said my mistress. “It is the stripping away.”

“Already?” said Dark Grandmother Perdita. “They are not ready for this. Even we did not have to submit to this.”

The Voice of the Wolf quickly snapped her head towards Dark Grandmother Perdita, putting a stop to Dark Grandmother’s Perdita’s concerns.

“My apologies, mistress.”

My mistress continued.

“Divestiture will take place over the next three days, including today. You will begin today, shortly after the red hoods are released from their studies. Remember that the greatest of destinies may require the abandonment of our desires,” she said.

The Voice of the Wolf pulled two vials out of her pocket.

“Take a vial,” said Dark Grandmother Ruby. Her voice faltered when she started coughing. “It will be needed today.” She grabbed the vials and held them out to Cecilia and me.

Her left hand shook underneath mine when I took the vial from her.

Dark Grandmother Ruby coughed again.

“We must purge you of your tendencies, of your connections, and of you. And this next test shall educate the remaining red hoods,” said Dark Grandmother Ruby.

“The natural order must be recovered and maintained,” said my mistress.

Chapter Twelve

Divestiture. Stripping away. Whatever this next stage brought to Cecilia and me, this next stage would make us less like us. Of that, I was certain. My mind screamed at me. How could I remain silent and watch that other me run after that red hood? And the look on that red hood's face darkened my heart in ways that I did not entirely understand. Extreme fear drove that girl away from that other me. The mere act of bearing witness to this poor girl's likely unfortunate future revealed something sinister about me. Through this other me, I had sacrificed something from this other girl and from me. And for what? To gain the approval of the Wolf. Forget what that strange voice told me. How could anyone stand there and watch that with a face that pleased the Wolf? Does this mean that I, like the other red hoods and dark grandmothers before me, had finally reached a moment where I could become a voiceless acolyte of the Wolf? The moment that I never thought was possible for me. Disappointment and fear doused my heart in such a volatile fashion that I thought that I would erupt at any time. And the Wolf held the very flame that could ignite it.

No. This all had to be a trick. A disturbing illusion. The One with the Crazy Grin had cautioned me to steel myself and project emotionless compliance to pass this phase. And I had passed it, but why did I not feel right?

Instead of torturing myself with more questioning, my attentions shifted to the small vial filled with the unknown liquid. It resembled ink in color but moved slowly when I gently shook it back and forth. How could such a small thing be useful? The vial, warm to the touch, soothed my aching palm. How would this liquid provide me with assistance during this divestiture stage, whatever that stage meant? In all of our studies, Dark Grandmother Ruby had never introduced this word, this concept to us. Dark Grandmother Ruby's excluding this word from us would have been a purposeful decision. If it was a significant process in serving the Wolf, why withhold this information? Whatever this was, it would rearrange me and Cecilia so we could resemble the Voice of the Wolf. Presumably, this would solidify our place here and bring us closer to pleasing the Wolf. But the Wolf would require continual loss from us. Of that, I was certain, too.

Dark Grandmother Ruby had avoided making eye contact with Cecilia and I after she gave us the vials. Dark Grandmother Ruby, while tough, held an attentive relationship with all red hoods. She knew our strengths and weaknesses. At random times, she would recall which lessons a red hood had struggled with multiple years ago. But now, Dark Grandmother Ruby behaved strangely. Her voice, previously strong and certain, now sounded diminished and uncertain.

“Move quickly,” said Dark Grandmother Ruby. She pulled on our robes, beckoning us out of the secret room into the hallway. Dark Grandmothers Perdita and Donnis remained behind with my mistress and the Voice of the Wolf. They slowly followed behind us, giving little attention to us.

“You will join the red hoods. Remember your vow to not share anything that has occurred. They will not know that the Wolf requires another Voice of the Wolf. They will not know what you saw.” Cecilia opened her mouth to speak but Dark Grandmother Ruby interrupted her. “Don’t even discuss it with each other.”

“Yes, Dark Grandmother,” I said. My low voice surprised Dark Grandmother Ruby. Her eyes shrunk.

“You cannot discuss what you saw with any of the dark grandmothers, either. The messages of the visions are for you alone.”

Cecilia and I looked at each other.

“Messages?” I asked.

“The Wolf has judged us all. These trials will both assess and educate you where I have failed you.” She eyed the dark grandmothers behind us. “I cannot say anymore. And may the Wolf not find you deficient.”

“What is in this liquid?” Cecilia asked.

Dark Grandmother Ruby huffed.

“I cannot say for sure. But if I had to guess, it might be poison,” said Cecilia.

I could not help but notice that Dark Grandmother Ruby eyed the vial in Cecilia’s hand. The vial appeared to contain the same unknown dark liquid as mine. My mistress and the Voice of the Wolf remained outside, presumably not by choice. Both were locked in an intense conversation. Dark Grandmother Predita pushed Cecilia closer to the front of the room.

“Never mind them. Not your concern. Focus on the present.”

I shifted my focus to the back of the heads of the red hoods. Their heads were held high. Attempts to rule over any urge to look back. At us. With

Dark Grandmother Ruby here now, she would swiftly return any curiosities with a painful rap against a hand, an arm, or most painful of all, a foot.

As I followed behind Cecilia, Dark Grandmother Predita, and the Crazy One with Grin, I felt the eyes of the other red hoods on us. Their eyes contained questions and accusations. Starcy sat on the left side so I kept my face slightly turned away from her. Her presence reminded me of my failure in the last test. I had or would bring harm to another red hood. Maybe the dark grandmothers were right. The Wolf had planted seeds of darkness in us all. This should be what I wanted. Acceptance by the Wolf. Confirmation that I belonged here.

Once we were in front of the red hoods, the air felt heavy. Or maybe I just felt lighter. Without being told, the red hoods sensed that something momentous was about to happen.

“Red hoods,” said Dark Grandmother Ruby sharply. “Your full attention is required. The Wolf watches. Red Hood Daphne and Red Hood Cecilia stand before you. As you all know, they are reaching the age of darkening soon. The light from the book will become a distant memory to them. And they will begin their journey to becoming dark grandmothers. The Wolf has decreed that they will start this process soon and he is considering them for an even greater calling.” Dark Grandmother Ruby paused. “We will reveal this position to you at the time of the Wolf’s choosing. Today you will witness the beginning of their transformation. And you will have a small role to play in this. You will have the opportunity to pledge yourself to one or the other.”

“What?” I whispered to myself. Cecilia appeared pleased with this revelation.

Ola looked up at Dark Grandmother Ruby with wide, uncertain eyes. Everyone else watched on intently, their expressions a mixture of wonder and fear.

My mistress and the Voice of the Wolf finally stepped inside. My mistress’s face was flushed and clammy. If not for the rules against it, I would have guessed that she had been crying. As before, she continued to avoid looking at me. Both remained in the back with my mistress looking at Cecilia while the Voice of the Wolf stared at me.

The Voice of the Wolf nodded.

“Right. It is time,” said Dark Grandmother Ruby. She stepped in front of Cecilia and I, with her back to the red hoods. She lifted her arms up and

beckoned us forward. “Step forward, selections.”

We moved forward. My legs resisted the move, making me wobble as I walked.

“Listen to everything I say before I act. Understand?”

Cecilia and I nodded.

“Get your vial out Daphne,” said Dark Grandmother Ruby.

Once I retrieved the vial from my pocket, the vial felt different, alive. It seemed to tickle the inside of my left hand. Somehow the liquid inside it seemed to pulse and writhe in a bizarre way.

“Two options lie before you. Drink or don’t drink,” said Dark Grandmother Ruby. “This decision is solely yours and your decision will not prevent you from continuing in the trials. However.” Dark Grandmother Ruby held her index finger up. She typically did this when she wanted to get a point across. “This will empower you through the remaining trials. Its contents will remain unknown to you. I will say no more about this to you. A decision is at hand now. Drink or don’t drink. And your decision is permanent.”

The image of the dark grandmothers’ heads flashed before my eyes. Did drinking that do that to them? Or something else.

I shook my head when Dark Grandmother Ruby looked at me. Her eyebrow rose. Her gaze shifted to Cecilia, who promptly dumped the vial’s contents in her mouth.

Cecilia shrugged. “I don’t feel anything.”

But I did. A sweet taste developed on my tongue and as it spread throughout my body, I felt a surge of energy and strength unlike anything I had ever experienced before. It was as if my choice was rewiring my very essence, making me more unyielding and less weak. And in that small moment, the dark grandmothers appeared more diminished in my eyes. I had made the correct choice.

“This is the path to power,” said the Voice of the Wolf. Her voice quiet, but strong at the same time.

Dark Grandmother Ruby nodded her head in a giddy fashion.

“This is the path to power” repeated the Voice of the Wolf, walking down the aisle between the red hoods. As she looked back and forth, the red hoods slowly repeated her words. Her words slowly made the room, the red hoods, and the dark grandmothers energetic. But not me.

My choice seemed less advisable as their voices rose. Their words combined into a song that my lips were ineligible to sing. Was this a song a celebration of Cecilia's choice or mine? Dark Grandmother Ruby walked over to me and grabbed my elbow. She held it until I started to mouth the meaningless words. Speaking the words revealed much about each red hood. Starcy, while unsure of herself, appeared cautiously optimistic about the words. Her brown cheeks reddened as she nodded her head. Julietta said the words with her smirk. Visa stared at the One with the Crazy Grin as she said the words. Her face appeared lifeless. Like me, she may have simply mouthed the words. Ola moved her lips slower than the words that were being spoken. What was she saying?

But that feeling deep inside. A feeling of dread filled my heart at the thought of even allowing that vial to touch my lips. This feeling confirmed my suspicion that drinking from that vial would cause an irreversible change. Of what, I had no idea. But the mere thought of not being able to undo the choice was enough for me. And what made me question the offer is the mere fact that the dark grandmothers offered us a choice. Most of my life, dark grandmothers demanded and directed us in all things. But today, we were asked. Why? Why was this optional? The Wolf should have commanded it of us.

And why did Cecilia feel nothing when she drank from her vial? She looked disappointed and slightly angry. She had obviously expected something from that vial, something instantly felt. She was angry enough that she did not even pretend to feel anything. She repeated the Voice of the Wolf's words with no feeling, no excitement. Dark Grandmother Predita gave Cecilia a slight nudge, to which Cecilia gave a wry smile. She was not happy, indeed.

And that unknown voice from that book that spoke to me recently remained silent during this stage. The silence seemed purposeful.

After a few rounds of fervent praise, the Voice of the Wolf abruptly stopped speaking and turned around, presenting her back to us. Quiet rested across the room. She slowly undid each clasp on her shoulder. The clasps held a second, but smaller cloak, on top of her hood. Undoing the first clasp caused the cloak to fall partially down, revealing golden embroidery of an incomplete image. Once she removed the second clasp, she let the cloak fall to the floor. Cecilia looked from the fallen cloak to Dark

Grandmother Predita, who nodded. Once Cecilia retrieved the cloak, she held it tightly against her body.

The image of our benefactor, the Wolf, was outlined in gold. But this image resembled how he looked in my vision. He was on all fours like an animal. A couple of red hoods leaned to the center aisle to get a better look.

“Wow,” said Starcy.

Normally, a dark grandmother would have scolded Starcy for speaking in the presence of the Voice of the Wolf without being prompted to do so.

“As you can see, the Wolf looks *different*,” said my mistress.

The red hoods nodded.

“The Wolf offers all of you this wonderful opportunity. An opportunity to transform into something nobler, purer, and more powerful. The multiple generations of red hoods and dark grandmothers have prepared for such a time. Worshiping and allegiance to the Wolf is not only because he is our leader. It is because he alone can prepare and change us. Without the Wolf, we would all be cursed with the Sight. We would be forced to remain as you are now. But as dark grandmothers, you will become part of the Wolf. And He will reward you through transformation,” said my mistress. “And one day, a final transformation awaits us before our last battle with the Wolf’s enemy.

My heart raced.

Ola slowly raised her hand.

My mistress pointed at Ola.

“Does this mean we will change and look different?” Ola hesitated.

“Will the changes be...” Ola didn’t finish her sentence.

My mistress paused and looked back at the Voice of the Wolf before speaking again.

“These changes will bring you honor,” said my mistress. “The Voice of the Wolf is showing you this, so you understand that power comes through abandonment of all that you are now. It is easy to forget that each of you are cursed with Sight, but the Wolf breaks this curse on your behalf. Focus on the day when you face the Wolf and he gives you the opportunity to pledge yourself to him,” said my mistress.

“The Wolf has gifted you the opportunity to witness part of the transformation of red hoods, Cecilia and Daphne,” said Dark Grandmother Ruby. “Watch and learn.”

The Voice of the Wolf turned around but stayed silent as the dark grandmothers spoke.

“It is time for the assignments,” interrupted my mistress. “Three red hoods must align themselves with Cecilia or Daphne. This choice will be permanent and will impact your ability to become a dark grandmother later.”

“No,” I quietly said.

Chapter Thirteen

Starcy raised her hand, making my body tremble with worry. Of course, Starcy raised her hand. Why couldn't she remain quiet and let the other red hoods gain attention?

"Yes, Starcy" responded Dark Grandmother Ruby.

"If only three of us have to pick, how will you pick the three? What happens to the rest of us? Can we all get the opportunity to serve the wolf?" asked Starcy.

"I misspoke. Three will be bound to Cecilia. Three will be bound to Daphne. Four of you will choose to not choose. We will start with the eldest," said my mistress.

Dark Grandmother Claude pushed a wooden cart down the aisle.

"Your decisions will determine what decisions are available to the remaining red hoods," said Dark Grandmother Ruby.

A thick and wiry green covering lay across the top of the wooden cart, concealing something. Dark Grandmother Claude shifted from foot to foot, a rare sight for a dark grandmother. She did not want to make eye contact with any of the red hoods. Instead, her eyes remained fixed on the floor while she stood still next to the cart with her hands clasped in front of her.

Dark Grandmother Ruby placed her hand on the shoulder of Dark Grandmother Claude. She relaxed, looked up and lifted the green covering from the cart. Three vials, much larger than the ones that were given to Cecilia and me, rested on top of the cart. It seemed that each housed the same liquid as well. But why did the red hoods have to drink more of this liquid of faith?

"Once you hear your name, step forward and let me know your decision. Don't take too long," said my mistress. "Julietta!"

No smirk marked Julietta's face now. She hopped up quickly at the sound of her name and presented herself with none of her usual delays.

"Will you drink? Will you not drink? Or will you not choose?"

Julietta averted her eyes to me. She pressed her lips together and leaned her head to the side. She would not choose. Besides Starcy, she was the closest to me. I wanted my fellow red hoods to succeed, and I could not be sure if taking my path was the right one. But I hoped at least one red hood would stick with me, but I doubted that Julietta would place herself at risk.

“I will not drink,” said Julietta proudly, and to my surprise. She flashed a small smile.

“Very well,” said my mistress. “Stand next to Daphine. Ola!”

Julietta joined me. I mouthed a thank you to her. Ola limped her way to the front.

“I’m not drinking that,” she quipped. She walked over to Julietta and I and stood next to us. Dark Grandmother Ruby inhaled loudly and looked away from Ola.

“Visa!” said my mistress.

Visa tripped over her robe while getting out of the wooden chair. Visa, while younger than some of us, was the tallest. She was also taller than most dark grandmothers. Rising and sitting in the chairs always brought her trouble. After she successfully stood up, she walked unusually slow to the front.

“Will you drink? Will you not drink? Or will you not choose?” asked my mistress.

Visa was the first person to pause and spend time choosing. She looked around at everyone.

“I’m not going to choose,” said Visa.

“You may sit down, Visa,” said my mistress.

After Visa declined to make a choice, two more red hoods shared her response, leaving only one more red hood with the opportunity to decline. Starcy was going to have to join Cecilia or me.

“Maisie!” called my mistress.

Maisie walked to the cart and grabbed a vial. She let the unknown liquid flow in her mouth quickly, only allowing herself to pause drinking once to breathe. She smiled and then walked over to Cecilia.

Willow, quiet like Maisie, got out of her seat when she was called. As she normally does, she kept her eyes on the floor as she walked to the cart.

“Willow. Drink? Not drink? Or not choose?” asked my mistress.

“I wanna join Daphine,” said Willow. Her voice was barely audible.

“Alright,” said my mistress quietly. “Join Daphine. Three options remain for the rest of you. One of you cannot choose. Two of you must drink.”

While unexpected but gladly welcomed, Red Hood Bridgette chose to drink when she was called next. She gave me a little hope that the next red hood would drink as well. I felt bad that I wished an unknown fate upon the

next red hood, but I would gladly drink if it meant that the youngest and the smallest would not have to choose anything.

Red Hood Helen destroyed my hope for Starcy when she stood up and said that did not want to have to choose right now. She sat back down quickly.

“Sorry,” said Helen. If it was not forbidden, she would have cried. She scrunched her face.

“Starcy!” said my mistress.

“Thank you,” said Starcy. Her words lightened the heaviness in Helen’s face. Starcy rose from her seat and smiled at our mistress. She walked a little faster than I preferred for her to.

“You will have to drink, Starcy,” my mistress said.

“Of course,” said Starcy. She grabbed the vial and drank the liquid. She struggled as she drank it. Tiny trails of liquid ran down her lips down her throat. She needed to stop drinking three times before she fully emptied the vial’s contents into her mouth. “Thank you,” she said. This time her thanks were directed towards the Voice of the Wolf whose presence had been forgotten.

Cecilia moved some. She looked annoyed that Starcy would be joining her.

“Now that you have all made your selections. Let’s discuss the end of the next stage of divestiture. Cecilia. Daphne,” said my mistress. “Tomorrow, you and the red hoods will begin traveling towards the Northern Mountain using an ancient path that few have walked before. You will go on foot. And you will go through the forest. Your mistresses will help you prepare for the journey. The red hoods who did not make a choice will remain here. Be ready by sunset tomorrow.”

Glances, small but still risky enough to unleash the ire of any of the dark grandmothers, revealed that questions filled our minds to the brim. None of us dared to speak to each other. Instead, we would replace our questions with compliance as we always did before. Instead, we stood up, ready to return to our residences. My mistress pulled Starcy away from Cecilia and walked out, not once looking at me. Hurried and heavy feet replaced my mistress’s typical dainty feet that moved my mistress across rooms with grace. I started to walk towards them, so I could get ready, but Dark Grandmother Ruby placed her arm in front of me. Blocking me from

joining my mistress and Starcy. What had I done to deserve that treatment from my mistress?

Dark Grandmother Ruby motioned to me to move towards the back with her. Her chestnut brown eyes looked slightly reassuring.

“I will prepare you for tomorrow’s journey,” she said. Against my best efforts, I pursed my lips in disappointment. Probably more so in anger. “Do you have a problem with this?” asked Dark Grandmother Ruby.

“No, of course not, Dark Grandmother.” I tried to feign a smile. I failed. “Did you want me to seek assistance from my mistress? I do not want to impose on you.”

Dark Grandmother Ruby nodded her head in acceptance.

“Girl, I have taught you well. Hmph! Wondered for a few moments there.” She gave me a quick tap on my hand and she let out a small chuckle. She may have wanted me to smile but my mood matched the sadness of her eyes. My mind focused on Starcy. If only someone would let me have an opportunity to speak with her. Warn her. Hug her. “This seeking the Voice of the Wolf business has changed things around, a little. You are still a red hood but you will have privileges, advantages, and challenges that other red hoods will never have. Do not forget this.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“Other red hoods can and probably will harbor certain feelings about that. Do not forget that your status threatens that of Cecilia,” said Dark Grandmother Ruby.

Dark Grandmother Ruby’s eyes concentrated on something behind me. I chanced turning around to see the source of interest. Cecilia. Her presence darkened and placed a weight on me. I had felt this one other time. A few years back, Julietta told me that she overheard the dark grandmothers talk about the Wolf visiting soon. The dread that descended on my person could not be pierced by anyone or anything. My body rejected all food. I did not speak. No dark grandmother had that effect on me. When Julietta told me that she joked, I could not believe her. Julietta spent the next few weeks trying to convince me with no success. Nadine found out and broke the spell over me. To this day, I cannot recall what Nadine did.

“Girl, you are staring,” said Dark Grandmother Ruby.

“May I ask a question, mistress?”

“Wait a moment. Follow me back here, first.”

Dark Grandmother Ruby slowly trod towards the back, farther away from the desks. As she walked, her right foot repeatedly hit the floor with a loud clunk. Since she tripped over Visa's pencil last year, the painful fall left Dark Grandmother Ruby favoring her right side. She rarely placed much weight on her left side. Visa was physically ill for an entire week. Rations rarely lasted for Visa when she was nervous. Julietta had to give Visa some of her rations for the week. We all waited for the Crazy One with the Grin to deliver punishment. But it never came. However, Dark Grandmother Ruby never walked the same after that.

Dark Grandmother Ruby used her battered green key to unlock the small door of matching green. Without confirmation from Dark Grandmother Ruby, I hung back, remaining closer to the desks. After opening the door, she bent over to get into the room. Since red hoods must never enter or get close to the room, I looked away. Surely, getting a view of the room was probably forbidden, too.

"Daphne. You can come on." Her leaned over figure motioned for me to join her. "Come quickly."

I obeyed Dark Grandmother Ruby and rushed into the room, bumping my head into the top part of the door frame. My forehead hurt but an invitation like this one may not be issued again. Bookcases scaled the lengths of the walls. Seven bookcases filled the room. These books looked worn and lived in, but the array of colors lifted my heart. The books brightened the feel of this room. If such a thing was possible, these books did not seem like they should be here. Unlike the grayish and earth-colored covers of the books that Dark Grandmother Ruby normally used, these covers presented colors that I had never seen before. Some covers were as bright as red but had a cooler tone. Unfamiliar colors filled the pages. A whisper of a sweet scent lingered in the room.

"Because you have chosen to never drink the Wolf's gift. You are permitted to take ownership of the journal of the last red hood who chose as you did today," said Dark Grandmother Ruby.

She retrieved a book with pages that had overtaken the spine and cover of the book. Each page was larger than the book itself. Dark Grandmother Ruby needed to use both of her hands to hold it. She placed the book in my hands and it weighed very little, despite the seemingly endless amount of pages stuffed within it.

“Our laws permit you, and only you to take this book. But most of the contents of these pages are for you alone. Tomorrow, you, Cecilia, and the red hoods bound to you, will travel to a place that dark grandmothers do not go. That book contains directions to where you need to go. You can only share the directions to this place with the other red hoods. Share nothing else,” said Dark Grandmother Ruby.

“Yes, dark grandmother,” I said. “Can I ask another question?”

Dark Grandmother Ruby nodded.

“How will I know where the location is in all of this?” I pulled the book open.

“Do not open this book in my presence,” whispered Dark Grandmother Ruby. She grabbed my hand and slammed the book shut. “You will find this place. If you do not, you cannot return here. You must travel to the place located in this journal and return. We will let you know if you are then ready to face the Wolf so he can choose.”

“Yes, dark grandmother,” I said.

“Tonight, you will sleep here. I’ll get you a cot. Spend the night reading that,” said Dark Grandmother Ruby. She walked away leaving me dwelling on my unhelpful thoughts.

I looked down at the journal. Two words were scribbled on the side of a page: “Kill me.”

Chapter Fourteen

I lightly tugged on the strangely colored slip of paper. It was attached to the book. While trying to not tear anything, I opened the book to the page with the words that should frighten anyone. The paper was attached to another paper with words. Tiny and messy words hinted to the urgency of the writer. Words that an impending event, possibly death, threatened to take from the person.

Words like those should elicit a reaction. Not me. I empathized with the writer because I understood. What awaited red hoods and dark grandmothers at the end of their lives? During my lifetime, one person did not return after she left to transition to a dark grandmother. But death never touched the village, though Dark Grandmother Ruby had discussed this concept with us. Death awaited those who abandoned our ways, abandoned the Wolf. But what was it exactly? Instruction about death implied that death symbolized the permanent ending of your purpose here, an endless punishment, and lastly, being cast out to an unknown state of nothingness. Deep within my heart, my rebellious nature wondered if death may be a new adventure worth seeking out. But thoughts of Starcy quelled the quickening of my heart. If the dark grandmothers were right about one thing, I needed to bury my self-serving attitude. They said it would prevent me from serving the Wolf. That partially scared me as I aged but the combination of Nadine's disappearance and of Starcy's arrival cracked me.

Hushed voices or sounds of a breeze, I could not tell which, drifted outside the door. Just in case Dark Grandmother Ruby returned to check on me, I moved to the cot that she retrieved for me. But I could not sleep yet, though. Afraid to put the book down, the book stayed firmly underneath my hands lest someone enter as I sleep and view the contents of the rare tome. The unknown book both warmed my hands, tempting me to open it so it could pull me deep inside it.

Those light voices again. Who was outside at this time? Tomorrow is already guaranteed to push me from the only place that I could ever remember being in. Could I get a little bit of quiet before then? Who could this be? No one wandered around in the dark. Especially alone. In light of what life is like now, maybe something else bad had happened. I threw the cover off me, and got up, keeping the book pressed between my hand and

stomach. I took a few steps towards the door. The voices stopped. Good. Let me get to sleep before I hear anything else. As soon as I reached the cot, the voices started again. But they were closer. Inside the building.

Goosebumps developed on the back of my neck and transformed into chills sliding down my back. I turned around but I was alone in the dark. Small cries pierced the dark room. After I lit the small light, my worries dissipated but the sounds did not. The whimpers seemed to come from the book. A second bizarre experience of hearing voices near or in books was not a coincidence. I abandoned any hope to sleep and moved to the desk.

When I opened the book to the point marked by the small slip of paper, the room fell silent again. The writer had scrawled words across the page: Go back for her! Go back for her!

I turned the page and a cream-colored paper was folded neatly behind it. A tiny piece of scarlet thread tied the paper to the binding of the book. A quick tug pulled the thick paper from the book. This paper unfolded into a length and width that was at least three times that of the book. Chills moved down my body again as I examined a drawing of a strange person leaning against a wall. I could not tell if the person was a red hood or a dark grandmother since the person did not wear a red hood. Was she even wearing clothes? Her body was lifted above the ground and centered on the wall. Long, dark hair hung down concealing her tilted down face. Thick dark lines ran across the wall, obscuring the small body. The body's shape was all wrong. She looked broken and contorted. She did not look right. A small inscription framed the left side of the drawing:

she is his now. she has joined the wolf. and he has given her a power that will travel through the bloodline and through the ages. she awaits those who share the blood. she rests in the forest, waiting to freely offer the wolf's irrevocable gift.

move towards the blackest mountain until you reach the ground with vines atop the ground. vines will take you to the one with the Wolf's gift.

"Wake up!" said Julietta. A not-so-gentle hand shook my shoulder.

"Huh." I opened my eyes and Julietta's eyes met mine. She ran a shaking hand through her hair.

"How are you not awake by now? Don't let anyone catch you," said Julietta. "Get up."

"Alright, alright, alright," I said. "Don't hover." I lightly pushed Julietta.

“You better hurry. The dark grandmothers already called for us. We are leaving now,” said Julietta.

“Not now. I haven’t got anything together yet.” I pulled Julietta. “Plus, it’s not morning yet.”

“What do you mean? Are you mad? It’s morning,” said Julietta. She waved her hand behind her.

“How is this possible?”

“It happens every day?” said Julietta. Her eyes narrowed.

“I was reading something last night. And then you woke me up,” I said slowly. “I don’t understand.”

“We can figure it out or not figure it out when we are on our way. Let’s get out of here. Old Mistress Ruby has already packed the wagon for you. What else did you do last night anyways?”

“Nothing. Why do you ask?”

Julietta nodded towards my hands. A grainy, black substance covered the tips of my fingers.

“I really don’t know.”

Julietta lifted her right eyebrow and then turned around. She motioned for me to join her. Julietta remained silent as we walked towards the outskirts of our village.

“So, do you really not know what you did last night? We shouldn’t share everything with each other, but I felt that this might be one of those where you should.”

“Dark Grandmother Ruby gave me this-” I stopped. I did not want to worry Julietta.

“It’s okay,” said Julietta.

“No, I will tell you. But let me wait to do it,” I said.

“Okay,” said Julietta. She walked a little faster, increasing the distance between us. “We are finally leaving this place. And before we are thirteen.”

We reached the other red hoods. Julietta leaned closer to me.

“Do you have any idea where we are going?” Julietta whispered.

“I think so,” I whispered back, looking down at the now, darkly stained book in my hands.

Doubled over, Cecilia coughed and swiped at a glassy fluid that seeped from the corners of her mouth. She cut her eyes at me and stood up.

“And so it begins now.” Since my mistress had spoken those words, recurring pains struck Cecilia. Cecilia and the other red hoods who had

sipped from the unknown vial. Cecilia's sudden scream made me smile.

"What is this pain?" asked Cecilia.

"Oh my dear Cecilia," said my mistress. Her voice remained smooth and unbothered by Cecilia's suffering. "This is the divestiture stage. You have two mornings to reach the place hidden in the forest."

Normally, dark grandmothers would whisper, yell, or threaten us with the most specific of instructions, demands, or laws. But this morning, they issued vague guidance: Reach the Old Woman in the forest. And the one who did not drink will know the way.

A frail Starcy stumbled to the ground, eliminating the smile that had spread across my face. Dark Grandmother Ruby grabbed my robe when Starcy fell to the ground, convulsing in a way that I had never seen before. One by one, Cecilia, Maisie, Bridgett, and Starcy fell in pain.

"Remember," whispered Dark Grandmother Ruby. "She is not with you anymore." Each time Starcy slipped or groaned in pain, those words echoed inside my head.

"Let's go," Cecilia yelled in irritation, pulling me out of the worrisome thoughts that had plagued my mind for most of the morning.

She stomped ahead, increasing the distance between herself and me. Starcy, with scarce a look at me, moved quickly to catch up with Cecilia. Maisie and Bridgette followed as well. The path took them between the dead trees, hiding them from my view. Having traveled deep into the forest, the path of pale dirt was a salvation for us. The farther we walked in, the less certain I was of our proximity from the village. Was it east? Southeast? Frankly, it did not really matter. When we reach our destination, we may have to continue our journey to meet the Wolf.

"That didn't take long," said Julietta.

"Huh?" said I.

Julietta motioned ahead.

"Them, of course. Cecilia's hoods. Whatever this is that the Wolf has you and Cecilia doing. It's changing everything."

"I know," I said.

"Hey. We all knew that things were going to change with us. Once we became dark grandmothers, we weren't going to be like the other red hoods anymore. We wouldn't be able to speak to them in the same way as before," said Julietta.

Julietta was right.

“I guess this just sped up the process,” I said.

Julietta nodded. She pulled me closer to her.

“Promise me something.”

“What?” I asked.

“Don’t trust her. She is not yours anymore. I overheard what Dark Grandmother Ruby said to you. She is Cecilia’s now. Who knows if that is good or bad for her. Or for you, even,” said Julietta.

I pulled away from Julietta, unbalancing her. She fell over a large tree root.

“How can you say that? You’re talking about Starcy. If she needs us, then-”

“Don’t,” said Julietta.

“She’s doing what she must. You know that. She’s still Starcy,” I said.

“Exactly,” said Ola. Ola placed a hand on my shoulder. She is doing what she needs to do to help Cecilia and gain the Wolf’s approval. Starcy was always the weakest of us all. Did anyone think she would ever be a dark grandmother?”

Julietta and Willow remained silent and turned away.

“What happens if Starcy believes that this is her way in?” said Ola.

“What wouldn’t Starcy do?”

They talked about Starcy like she would do something that might harm someone. Starcy always possessed an attitude that she would be willing to do anything, regardless of her physical abilities, to please the dark grandmothers and the Wolf. But there were things that Starcy would not do. She would not hurt anyone. Especially not me.

Ola and Julietta did not understand how strong Starcy was. They had not seen her as I had.

“You’re all wrong. And you will see. You will see,” I said.

“Daphine, you will see sooner than you think,” said Ola.

“How can you be sure?” I asked.

“Because I know what I would do if I needed a way to become a dark grandmother,” said Ola.

“What would you do?” I asked.

“Everything. Be glad that I am with you and not with Cecilia.”

We continued in silence afterwards. Staying close to Cecilia seemed less of a priority but they remained close enough that we could hear their steps and their occasional breaks. They finally stopped long enough for us to

reach them. Cecilia and Bridgett were hunched over, hurling something from their mouths onto the ground. Starcy and Maisie were seated on an enormous tree root that had bowed above the ground.

“I can’t take it,” moaned Bridgett. She sounded out of breath and weak.

“Part of the process,” said Cecilia. She smiled at me in a way that made me ill. “How much longer, girl who did not drink?”

“My stomach feels heavy,” said Bridgett. She squatted down and pulled on her robe.

“Silence!” said Cecilia. Her sharp voice made Starcy jump.

“I don’t know. We just keep going until we reach this ‘Old Woman.’ Remember those vines in the ground?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Cecilia.

“When we start to see them, they should lead the way. If we keep going, we can make it in time,” I said. My voice shook as I spoke. Cecilia’s eyes appeared to change from their usual brown to amber gold as I spoke. She blinked and her eyes appeared normal.

“You know. I don’t think you know anything. What’s this book that you are carrying? Give it to me.” She pulled on the sack that I had been carrying.

“Stop it.” I shoved Cecilia backwards. She charged at me, and Julietta intervened, pushing Cecilia into a tree. When Cecilia landed into the tree, a splintering crack echoed throughout the forest. Cecilia bent over and began coughing and a now grayish substance landed on the ground.

“Sorry. Are you okay?” I asked.

“No, Daphne. She was going to hurt you. Let her stay there,” said Julietta. She was out of breath, but she kept her eyes on Starcy and Bridgett. “And you two, don’t you try anything.”

“Hold on, Julietta. Stay quiet,” said Ola.

“What?” I asked.

“Shh. You hear that? What is that cracking noise? Since Cecilia hit that tree, it hasn’t stopped. “And it’s everywhere,” said Ola.

The cracking sound was everywhere. But the sound was coming from different places each time.

“Ow, ow, ow. What is that?” said Bridgett. The earth was moving on her. Twisted roots covered her feet

“Move!” I yelled, more at Starcy than at Bridgett.

“I can’t,” said Bridgette. Her eyes, now large with panic, looked to me for help.

The roots moved slowly and cracked as thorns pushed from within to the outside.

“Does anyone have a blade on them?” I asked.

No one moved. Instead, everyone glanced around and moved farther away from similar roots that had started to move above the ground.

“Come on. Give me a blade!” Willow dropped to the ground and began searching through the bag that she had tied around her waist. She pulled a cloth-wrapped blade out and handed it to Julietta, who ran to me. Cecilia shook her head.

“I can’t stay here. I can’t stay here,” said Cecilia.

“Don’t leave, Cecilia. Stay and help me! She’s one of yours.”

“No. I need to get to the Old Woman. Let’s go, Starcy,” said Cecilia.

“Starcy is not going anywhere with you,” I exclaimed.

“Daphine, it is not safe here. I wanna go with Cecilia,” said Starcy. She kept her face turned away from me.

“Starcy, stay with me. Stay here. Don’t go out there alone with Cecilia.” I did not trust that Cecilia would protect Starcy. But more than that, I did not want Starcy to leave me. We were supposed to stay together.

Starcy did not respond to me. She whispered something to Julietta before she left to join Cecilia.

“Daphine, stop fussing over Starcy. She’s made her decision. Bridgette!” said Ola. She pointed to Bridgette’s feet which looked like they had been pulled deeper into the earth.

“Is it going to take my feet. It’s pulling at me, and it hurts,” said Bridgette.

I remained silent as I examined the root moving on her feet. Touching the root was out of the question because of the risk of the thorns. The thorns brimmed with fluid that oozed from small openings at the base of the thorns. Using the blade, I carefully ran the tip down the root, moving it between two thorns. The thorn was tough but too much pressure may push the blade through too fast, harming Bridgette. In a sawing motion, I broke through multiple layers of the thorn. Julietta, who had also found a blade, repeated the same process on another portion of the root, which had now stopped twisting and moving across Bridgett’s feet.

The root seemed to expand in size.

Bridgette's face had turned gray, and her eyes started to close.

"Something's wrong, it's digging more into my feet, but there is no more pain," said Bridgette.

Julietta and I locked eyes. Bridgette's feet were not good. We sawed into the root faster, hoping to stop any damage to Bridgette's feet. Thick liquid leaked out of the root and all over Bridgette's toes. After cutting through the root, Julietta used the tip of the blade to grab it and pull it off Bridgette's feet.

Bridgette's slippers were soaked in fluid. I teared off a piece of my cloak so I could pull off her slippers without touching the strange substance. The root had bored two small holes into the top of each of Bridgette's feet.

"Daphne," whispered Julietta. "There's no blood."

Julietta used her knife to rub it against the side of Bridgette's foot.

"Careful," I said.

"Do you feel this Bridgette?" asked Julietta.

"No. I am alright now." She sat down and put her slippers back on. Her grayish face filled up with color. She stood back up and cleared her throat.

"Let's go."

Chapter Fifteen

“Come on, Daphine. We need to hurry. We can’t stay in one place for too long, now,” said Julietta.

Her hands squeezed into fists. I looked to Ola. Her eyes rapidly scanned the now-moving ground while she massaged the back of her neck. Willow nodded. Julietta was right. We could not stay here. But did I really want to keep moving forward to visit this Old Woman? I pulled out the drawing of the supposed Old Woman.

“So is that the old crone we are trying to get to? For that divest-i-thing?” asked Julietta.

“Divestiture,” I interrupted.

“Yeah, that. Cecilia can then get her power. She can become a dark grandmother leader or something like that. And then the Wolf will grant her some kind of power,” mocked Julietta.

Willow lightly hit Julietta on the arm. Her wide eyes looked around.

“You all know that I am not wrong. I know we do not ask questions but what is this power? Other than getting pale, wearing a darker hood, ruling over us red hoods, and calling yourself a mistress or a dark grandmother,” said Julietta.

“You know something happens when we become dark grandmothers,” I said slowly, careful to not reveal too much. “Because they are...different when they return,” I said.

“But what happens?” asked Julietta.

She asked a question that red hoods should never ask. And that question brought the hoodless appearance of the dark grandmothers to mind. The normally overbearing and intimidating dark grandmothers looked sickly and delicate. Their hairless state did not seem purposely done. They looked sick. Had some dormant illness invaded their blood and pulled much of what made them red hoods from them? Or was that part of the required sacrifice to gain authority from the Wolf. They were older, broken versions of the red hoods they were before. Even though the dark grandmothers had revealed a secret part of themselves to me, sharing what I saw would be absolutely forbidden.

“Who cares? We will find out if we ever become dark grandmothers,” said Ola.

Julietta laughed. “Do you really think we will become one of them, now? If Cecilia makes it to this woman and the Wolf before us, something is going to happen to us. And we are not going to receive ‘the blessing’ of becoming a dark grandmother.” said Julietta. Her voice dropped low.

I felt bad that my decision would impact Julietta, so. But this should not be happening. I robbed my red hoods of the opportunity to become dark grandmothers at the appointed time. This had been the way for multiple generations of red hoods. My unorthodox nature had compromised my future and that of my fellow red hoods. Was this what I wanted?

“Let’s go, Daphne. We need to catch up with Cecilia, whether for good or bad,” said Ola.

It did not take long to catch up with Bridgette. Cecilia and the rest of her red hoods were nowhere in sight. Each of my steps brought me closer to my destination but Bridgette skipped ahead, showing no signs that something had crushed her feet just moments before. As the breaks and cracks became louder, we jumped if the branches broke ground too close to our feet. Except for Bridgette, that is. She hummed a strange melody as she moved steadily along the path. Her feet rarely moved if a thorn opened and splashed its nameless fluid on her.

Ola walked a little faster and got closer to Bridgette. Julietta went between them and pulled Ola back to us.

“Listen. A moment ago, Bridgette was scared, hurting, and close to passing out. Now, she is okay but has two large holes in her feet. I don’t want her in pain, but those holes are too deep for her to feel nothing. And there is nothing in them. Not normal,” whispered Julietta.

“What do you mean by that?” questioned Ola.

“There was no blood in them. As deep as the holes were, we should have seen something in them. They were dark,” I said. “Bridgette’s not right. Let’s keep a distance between her and us.”

“She’s one of the younger ones. We can’t abandon her like Cecilia,” said Ola.

She was right. Bridgette was only nine years. Other unknown threats may be hidden throughout our journey. Why did I believe this was supposed to be easy?

“It doesn’t matter, look,” said Willow.

“What is it?” I asked.

Ahead of Bridgette, large branches with thorns extended well above the ground. Branches formed shapes that were almost double our height. Walking under a canopy of branches that crossed over our heads would make it more difficult for us to avoid the thorns.

Avoid the child of the briar.

That voice again. Normally soothing, the voice instead buzzed through my mind.

“I don’t want that stuff to get on me. How are we going to get through?” asked Willow. She climbed on the wagon and sat down, pulling her knees to her chest.

“Cecilia was right. Moving quickly is all we can do,” I said.

“How far will we have to go, though?” asked Willow.

“We move as quickly as we can and for as long as we can. We leave the wagon behind.”

“Really?” asked Willow. She hugged her knees tighter.

“It’ll only slow us down. We carry what we can in the bags. Split the food and water between them. Make sure food and water is in each bag. If we lose one, we will be okay. And keep any blades in your hands.

“No, no, no, no,” said Willow. “I’m staying here.”

Julietta grabbed a bag and started removing provisions and splitting them between the other bags.

“Alone?” asked Julietta. “What happens if these branches, these *things*, start to move up the wagon?”

“I’m going back,” cried Willow. “My mistress will take me.”

“You can’t go back.

“What’s gonna happen if I go back? Maybe nothing happens if I go back,” whined Willow.

“That’s right,” I yelled. “Maybe so. None of us knows what will happen. And *that’s* the problem. *That* is why we are here right now. No one is going to help us. It is up to us to make it to the Old Woman. And we will figure out what’s next then.”

Willow sobbed loudly, burying her head between her knees and body.

“Why do I have to be here? I want my mistress,” said Willow. Her voice becoming shrill. “I need my mistress.”

“She’s crying,” murmured Ola. “Red hoods don’t cry, isn’t that right Willow.”

Willow became silent and wiped her eyes with her sleeves.

“That’s right, Willow. We don’t cry,” I said. “Willow, you are the quickest at making or repairing hoods. Take the extra bags and fasten them together. Can you pull them together and make a blanket or canopy? Use whatever you can find in the wagon.”

“Yeah. I can do that. Won’t take me long,” said Willow. Willow grabbed a bag and began pulling it apart.

“Ola, help her. Julietta, you can stop. Let’s get Bridgette,” I said.

“Sounds like Daphine may make a good dark grandmother,” remarked Julietta.

Earlier, Bridgette had walked to a tree to the left, placed one hand on the tree, and stood still. She lightly swayed to the left and right. She remained fixated in this same state.

“What is she doing?” asked Julietta. Her voice shook. We slowly approached Bridgette.

“Bridgette, are you okay?” I asked. She mumbled something but I could not make out what she said. “What was that?”

Bridgette’s small frame turned around. Dark fluid drained from her nostrils, the corners of her eyes, and her ears. The dark fluid had infiltrated most of her veins. Her mouth chattered garbled words.

“You’re not making sense,” I said.

“Why do you care about that? Look at her,” said Julietta, stepping back from Bridgette.

Bridgette’s head rotated quickly and she locked eyes with Julietta.

“Buried deep, buried deep. Don’t let them sleep. Buried deep, buried deep. Don’t let them sleep.” She looked at Julietta, but Bridgette’s eyes were vacant.

“Why is she doing that?” Julietta placed her hands on her ears. “Tell her to stop it.”

Avoid the child of the briar.

This time, the warning traveled along a sudden breeze that caused the trees to bend.

“What was that?” asked Julietta. She dropped her hands. “Who was that?”

“You heard that?” I asked.

“Buried deep, buried deep. Don’t let them sleep. Buried deep, buried deep. Don’t let them sleep,” said Bridgette. Her voice became louder.

“Stop it, Bridgette! Stop it now!” yelled Julietta.

Bridgette repeated Julietta's words as soon as Willow said them. But Bridgette's voice, normally high-pitched, took on a deeper tone. And Bridgette repeated the words as Julietta said them. Bridgette knew what Julietta was going to say.

"Bridgette, let's get you out of here," I said. Bridgette spoke my words as I said them. She fell to the ground.

"Dig! Dig! Dig!" yelled Bridgette.

She rapidly dug into the dirt, pulling up branches, cutting her hands on the thorns. Oh, what had happened to her hands? Her blood had changed as her blood resembled the dark liquid that seeped from the thorns. With a crack, Bridgette stood back up and yelled again. "Dig, dig, dig. Buried deep, buried deep. Don't let them sleep. Buried deep, buried deep. Don't let them sleep." She smiled and dropped back down and started digging in. Afraid to touch her but afraid to leave her, I stood watching Bridgette. Who was she now? Would this happen to the rest of us?

"Let her be, Daphne. Let her be," said Julietta. She gently pulled me back from Bridgette.

Ola walked over to us and handed us a bag. "Willow is finished. Let's get out of here."

Willow had used the branches that we had brought for kindling to provide support for our covering. We raised the covering over us, using the branches to stabilize the cover. And without any thought as to how far the Old Woman was, I yelled, "Run!" We ran, leaving Bridgette behind. We ran and ignored the sounds of the popping and cracking of the land. We ran and ignored the sounds of the dark liquid dropping on the cover. We ran until we reached a small clearing with cobblestones. A figure was hanging on a grand stone structure. It was the Old Woman.

The Old Woman. Alone, I walked to her, uncertain of what would happen. Uncertain of what I would do if provided the chance to claim any secret power that she possessed. What if this power could help Starcy? These thoughts and questions angered me because I had no answer when I wanted to be resolute. So, I continued forward.

When we stepped into the clearing, Julietta whispered, "She's alive. How can she be alive like that?"

None of the red hoods would get closer to her. Instead, they stayed near the back of the clearing, waiting. Julietta's face remained transfixed on the Old Woman. I slid my feet forward, resisting the urge to run away. If I had

known that my small moments of defiance would one day place me on a path of destruction or salvation, I would have done better. And maybe, I would have never heard that voice. Maybe the Northern Mountain would have never cracked. And maybe everything would have stayed the same. Starcy would be safely tucked away in our village. I did not want to be responsible for unleashing whatever the Wolf intended for me. Or for them. But I needed to know what happened to Starcy.

I gazed upon the Old Woman, lifted high and against a crumbling stone wall. It had been there a while, and appeared messy, and infected, like the ground on our way here. Vines, darker and threatening than what we had seen on the way here, pushed and pulled in and around her. Their thorns dripped in the familiar sinister, black toxin. But it looked darker, thicker, and steam arose from it. The toxin slid down, corroding the wall and the stones below in its darkness. Whatever this fluid, the Old Woman or the vines were the source. And this fluid had infiltrated this region. And worse, it could make its way to our village, if it had not done so already.

I wanted to laugh at her being called the Old Woman. She was anything but. She resembled a young dark grandmother or an older red hood. Her body had resisted time itself. Her pale skin, much more so against the aggressive vines, glimmered, adding to the beauty and horror of her condition. I could not tell where she or the vines began or ended. Who would want this? My mind drifted to the words in the drawing. She wanted this. In exchange for whatever she is now, the Wolf provided her with a unique gift and with a power.

Her eyes were filled with unsaid stories. Stories that were probably too ancient to be confined to any of the books that we had read. Her eyes looked like they had lived in a world outside the bounds of mine. She was a forgotten one. And here in this hidden part of our world, the Old Woman undoubtedly safeguarded secrets for the Wolf. But there was something off about her eyes; she was not happy to see us.

Vines, twisted throughout her hair, spread her hair out against the wall. The same dark fluid coated her hair. No, she did not possess the relic. She was the relic of power. And the air itself seemed to carry no sound, as everything here paid reverence to her. My eyes traced the vines until they locked with the Old Woman's eyes, burning through my mind. I did not believe my thoughts would be safe around her, so I looked away.

"And who are you? Do you know what you are here to seek?" asked the Old Woman.

"I'm the red hood Daphne. I traveled here for the relic," I said.

"Of course, you are. But what do you want, little one?" asked the Old Woman.

"I want to be the new Voice of the Wolf. I want to have enough power to rule over the dark grandmothers," I said.

"Wrong!" her voice whispered, sending echoes skipping across the stones around us.

"But-"

"No. Tell me why you are here," she purred.

"I am here for power," I said.

"Why?"

"I need to save Starcy, and I need to leave this place," I said.

What a noble aim," she mocked. "And what else?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? You want something else. Tell me. Tell me. Tell me," said the Old Woman. Her words sawed into my consciousness, pulling out unforgivable words.

"I want to rule over the Wolf. Is that what you wanted?" I yelled.

"No one rules over the Wolf. Let me tell you a story, fiery one," said the Old Woman.

She continued to speak and shared information about a world that I did not believe. She spoke of the Wolf and the threat to his existence. An enemy had sought him out, but the Wolf retreated and hid here. She, along with others "like her," joined him because of a power that had been withheld from them. They had also questioned the destruction of the Wolf and others like him.

"There are more like Him?" I interrupted.

"Oh yes, many. Probably less now," said the Old Woman. "But after today, there will be more," she said, her voice a haunting whisper.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I have given most of my pure blood, my seed, to the ones that came before you. And when I die, the rest will mutate and return to the village."

"The children of the briar," I said.

"Hmm. How do you know of them since you were raised in the village? Ah! The true hunter speaks with you," she remarked, her eyes wary of

mine. She smiled, but dark tears fell from her eyes. "At one time, I did too," she confessed, with regret and pride filling her voice.

Impatient, I stammered, "What do I need to do to complete the divestiture stage?"

"Divestiture? That means nothing to the Wolf," she rasped, her voice growing weaker. "The Wolf does not desire what he can easily attain. He hungers for the uncommon, for the one who is different. And you will relinquish your all to the Wolf. That will be your inheritance."

Out of concern or satisfaction, she further explained the Wolf's deception. The Wolf had already chosen me, and the divestiture process was a guise, a means to ensnare the easily acquired. Cecilia and Starcy were both damaged in their own ways. The Wolf chose them for their vulnerability. But he wanted me, the strange one, the one who never felt like a future dark grandmother.

Underneath the vines, the Old Woman's frame dissipated as if the vines were shedding her existence. In a moment, she wasted away. I turned to my companions; the burden of the Old Woman's knowledge had changed them. They would follow me, for good or bad, to wherever I went.

My mind felt as if it was being pulled in multiple directions. I was not just a tool that the Wolf wanted to use; I was a piece that he wanted to collect. The realization filled me with both fear and a strange sense of hope. I turned to face Julietta, Ola, and Willow, finally understanding that our entire world was twisted, wrong. While the Wolf had his plans for us, there were other plans in place for us. We had been chosen to potentially alter our world. And the Wolf's enemy, the Hunter, had done this.

"We must return," I declared.

"You want to go back?" asked Ola.

"We must. We have a responsibility to assist the other red hoods while we can. But we must be careful," I said.

I was sad that the Old Woman had given all so that others might carry on the legacy of the Wolf. I would not do this. And if I could, I wanted to destroy this legacy.

We would return to our village but with knowledge that may free our other red hoods. The Wolf may have chosen me, but I would be the one to take a stand against him, to sever ourselves from the Wolf, and to end the Wolf's story.

About the Author

Felicity Winters is a new multi-genre writer. Follow her on Kindle Vella.
Book Two of this Twisted Red Riding Hood Saga will be published in April 2023!